
Live in Faith and Hope

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 17 November 2024

Daniel 12:1-4 • Hebrews 10:15-25 • Mark 13:1-8



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Jesus spoke from time to time about the end times — the times before he is to come again in glory. They are terrifying times, yet with hope for the faithful. In today's Gospel, and in the remainder of Mark chapter 13, Jesus describes “days of distress unequalled from the beginning” of the world: wars, earthquakes and famines; betrayal, arrests and hate; false prophets, desolation and falling stars. It is a frightening picture, and Jesus means it to be so, in order to prepare and warn his disciples, those men and women who will be charged with teaching all the rest of us everything that Jesus has taught them.

Yet it is also a message of hope, for after all these terrible things happen,

At that time [people] will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the

four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

(Mark 13:26-27)

The great trial will be followed by the great reward — for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Again, Jesus says that those “who stand firm to the end will be saved” (13:13).

What are we to make of all this? Some may say, “Well, Jesus spoke these words 2,000 years ago, and they haven’t come true yet, so why worry about it?” It is true that some of Jesus’s predictions were expected to come true within a matter of years. Paul expected Jesus to return within his lifetime. In his letter to the Philippians he says,

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there,
the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil 3:20)

Jesus also told his disciples,

I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all
these things have happened. (Mark 13:30)

But for us, in the year of our Lord 2024, we may no longer expect Jesus to return in our lifetimes — but he might. Some today like to try to determine just when he will return. I may have told this story before, but there was a fellow in California who ran a Christian radio station. I used to listen to it frequently when I was driving, as they read long passages of Scripture and had some interesting preachers. Some years ago, this fellow made a prediction about the end of the world and the return of our Lord. He asserted confidently that Jesus would return on February 27, 2008, or some such date — I don’t remember exactly. It was then about a year in the future.

Well, February 27, 2008 rolled around, and — the world didn’t end (as you may recall). So this man went back to the drawing board, so to speak, reworked his calculations, and made another prediction, for the following year. That one didn’t come about either. I think he gave up after that, and he died not long afterwards — he was in his 80s, I believe. Presumably, he knows the true date now!

It is tempting to try to figure it out. But Jesus tells us plainly that no one knows the day or hour, except God. “You do not know when that time will come,” he tells Peter, James, John and Andrew, and goes on to say, “Therefore keep watch” (Mark 13:33,35). And that is the point of Jesus’ discourse in this chapter. God speaks to us through the Bible, but only gives us certain information. Everything we need to know about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit is in the Bible, as well as everything we need to know about the times to come, for God is true and loving.

Yet sometimes we can’t help thinking that the wars we see today, nation against nation, and the earthquakes that we here in Christchurch know so well, may be what Jesus is talking about. How can we tell if *these* are the times Jesus is talking about? The answer is that we cannot. Again, only God knows what will happen,

and when; Jesus said that even he did not know when it would happen. The details of earthquakes and wars are not important, for earthquakes and wars have happened all over the world for millennia. It is fruitless to claim that today's events are definitely the last before Jesus comes again. What we can be sure of is that when it does happen, there will be terrible and startling events.

So although we may be tempted to probe this mystery, it is not necessary, because the lesson Jesus wants us to take is clear: be prepared. And we know how to be prepared. It's pretty simple: love God and love God's people. Pray. Worship. Keep up your relationship with Jesus Christ as an ongoing, conscious practice. Meet with other Christians to do these things — as Paul said, “Let us not give up the habit of meeting together” (Hebrews 10:25), for sharing our faith strengthens everyone. Spread the Gospel, for Jesus tells us that “the Gospel must first be preached to all nations” (Mark 13:10).

In our Old Testament passage today, the angel tells Daniel, speaking of the end times:

When that time comes, all the people of your nation whose names are written in God's book will be saved ... And those who have taught many people to do what is right will shine like the stars forever. (Daniel 12:1,3)

We are the heirs of that promise. What the angel promised to Daniel about his people, the Jews, is also now promised to all people, for God has no favourites. The end times will come, as Jesus says, but we need not fear them. Live in faith and hope. If we keep our faith in Jesus, and if we teach other people about him, then we too will shine forever in God's heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.