

Isaiah 64

¹ Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ² As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!

³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. ⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. ⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? ⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. ⁸ Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins for ever.

Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people.

Mark 13 ²⁴ ‘But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

²⁶ ‘At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

⁷ 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. ²⁸ Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³² ‘But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It’s like a man going away: he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. ³⁵ ‘Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!”’

This time last year, who would have believed what sort of year 2020 would turn out to be? Even at the beginning of the Covid crisis in March, we would have found it hard to believe we would facing severe restrictions around Christmas and lockdown continuing well into next year. Our whole world has changed. Many are wondering: *What on earth is God doing?* and others are asking: *What should we be doing?*

In our Advent Sunday reading from Mark 13, Jesus is seeking to prepare his disciples for an even greater crisis than the one we are facing now.

A time when the whole way of Israel’s life would come to a violent end.

It is sometimes difficult for us to understand in Mark 13 exactly what period Jesus is talking about. Is he talking about events that would happen within the life-time of the disciples or is he talking about the end of the world?

As with many prophetic messages, Jesus’ message is a bit like seeing Everest from a distance. (Share picture – then zoom in)



As you get closer to the mountain range, particular mountains come near but others disappear completely from view behind the near mountain. Mark 13 is very like that.

The context of the passage is that Jesus has been teaching in the Temple and as they leave at the end of the day, the disciples start exclaiming about how magnificent the Temple was. It had so far taken 46 years to build and even though it was not yet complete it was considered to be one of the great wonders the world. So we might feel that the disciples were justifiably proud of this building. But Jesus immediately starts to warn them that the time will come when not only is the Temple completely destroyed but the whole of Israel's world as they knew it.

Indeed, in much of Mark 13 Jesus is saying the time will come when they will need to escape so as not to get caught up in the terrible slaughter which will take place when the Romans lay siege to Jerusalem. All this would be fulfilled within their own life-times - some 40 years later in AD 70.

But this is like the near mountain in the Himalayas, the one that is immediately in front of you. However, Jesus also sees that this mountain is part of the much larger range of God's purposes. The events that are soon to take place are also a foretaste of what is to come, of the ultimate summit, the end of the world.

Jesus here is primarily talking about the event that will happen while *this generation* is still alive.
³⁰ *Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.* The destruction of Jerusalem. Watch out for the signs and then you will **know** when the events are near, so make sure you take action (flee the area).

Jesus refers to these terrible events in these verses twice as ***these things***

²⁹ *Even so, when you see these things happening,*

³⁰ *Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.*

But then in v.31 **But** he says *about that day. No one knows, not even Jesus himself. No one knows when that time will come.*

Jesus seems to be talking about a different time of which the destruction of Jerusalem is but a foretaste. He has lifted his eyes from the almost immediate events of the destruction of Jerusalem, to the ultimate events of the end of the world. But he wants us to know that these extraordinary events will definitely take place. So he prefacing them by saying *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

We know that Jesus' words about the *destruction of Jerusalem have now all come to pass - so we can trust what he says about the future*

Jesus uses the apocalyptic, prophetic language of the Old Testament to describe the events at the end of the world '*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; 25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*' This is the vivid language of prophecy saying that all the fixed points in our world, which we thought would last forever, will change and collapse.

This was certainly true when Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70:

Four successive Caesars in AD 69. Jerusalem destroyed. The Temple building and the whole sacrificial system destroyed. All Jewish autonomy and right to self-governance destroyed. And we can see that this was a foretaste of the end of the world.

Indeed, we might well say that today we are living through another time when the world as we know it is falling apart:

The fixed permanent features of our world are disappearing:

- a. This year especially, our whole way of life has changed because of Covid and although we are hopeful that the restrictions will end at some point next year, we know that some things will never be quite the same.
- b. Just as the whole temple system was destroyed in AD 70 so the whole Christian edifice of our culture is collapsing today
Collapse of family and marriage leading to social breakdown
- c. The whole capitalist system seems to be falling around our ears. The economic crisis, the European Union.

- d. Think of how the great powers in the world have fallen in the last 100 years. First of the Nazi Third Reich, then of the influence of Britain in the world, then of the Soviet Union and now it seems even the influence of the USA is on the wane and within our life-time the rise of China
- e. climate change and ecological disaster

These are all things that our whole society have put their trust in.

We have imbibed that belief in the permanence of these things with our mother's milk, our educational system. But we are seeing that our trust is misplaced. They are not permanent, unchangeable or eternal.

One thing that is unchangeable and completely trustworthy is the word of Jesus. And this is what Jesus promises:

³¹ *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away* When the world around us is falling apart don't be surprised and don't panic because God is not taken by surprise. He has known about all this from the beginning and has woven all of these events into his purposes for the redemption of the world.

So, what lessons can we learn from this passage? How should we live? What are we meant to do?

1. Don't waste your time speculating about when Jesus will return:
Jesus could not make himself clearer about this point:

³² *But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*

³⁵ *"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back*

WE DO NOT KNOW! WE ARE NOT MEANT TO KNOW!

2. Live every day as if this is the day Jesus is going to turn up.
Be on guard! Be alert! What does this mean in practice?

1st Keep faithful to Jesus - keep your spiritual life alive.

³⁶ *If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.* Someone spiritually asleep is no longer able to hear the voice of God, has stopped speaking to God and is oblivious to drifting away on the values of the world around them.

2nd Keeping working for Jesus - do well the jobs, Jesus has given you. He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task,

3rd Keep looking for Jesus - not up in the sky but look for Jesus in everyone you meet.

v. ³⁴It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and ...tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Imagine the household gets a new doorman. He has never met the owner, he doesn't know what he looks like, but he knows that one day – or even one night, the owner will return. How will he treat each person who comes to reception? If he is wise, he will treat him as if he might be the owner, just in case he is.

So should we look for Jesus in everyone we meet and treat them accordingly.

Be alert, be awake, be ready! For when the Messiah comes, he will come when - and where - you least expect him.