

Pentecost 25 C

**November 18, 2007: Wesley 9 & 10.30am**

Luke 21: 5-19

Luke chapter 21 is a very difficult chapter and, to begin, it is important that we understand the style of writing that it contains. Unless we do that we will never understand it - we will only mis-understand it.

Luke 21 is a classic example of what is called apocalyptic writing. The word apocalypse comes from a Greek word, and means 'revelation'. Outside of Church circles people are probably most familiar with the term through the film *Apocalypse Now*. That was a movie which cast a sense over the Vietnam War that that tragic and brutal experience was a taste of the end of the world. As an example, it leads us to the first key element in this type of writing called 'apocalyptic'. It is marked by a fascination with the end of this world and what is coming next. Apocalyptic books and movies are full of images about what will happen to us all when the world comes to an end. And because every culture has been intrigued by such questions apocalyptic writers and preachers have found willing audiences from Jesus' day to the Hollywood of today.

The apocalyptic style of writing is not common in the Bible, but the Revelation to John, Luke chapter 21, Mark chapter 13, and in the Old Testament the Book of Daniel are among the clearest examples. Unfortunately, they tend to feature prominently in the writing and preaching of TV evangelists and others who want to proclaim nothing but condemnation. Such preachers seem far more interested in the next world than they do in the well-being of this one. They ignore the fact that 'apocalyptic' portions of the Bible represent just a fraction of the full breadth of Christian teaching.

Along with this first aspect of apocalyptic writing - a fascination with the end of the world - there is a second common feature. Major crises of history have been their trigger. In other words, real and truly frightening events have caused this type of thinking.

Jerry Falwell, the American tele-evangelist, said during an interview after the September 11 attacks that this was the start of God's judgement upon America (for promiscuity, homosexuality, etc). That's apocalyptic thinking; a calamitous event is given meaning beyond what we know to have been the historical cause (ie. extremists flying planes in a terrorist attack) and given some sort of transcendent meaning.

Turning our attention back to Luke 21, what we have there is the linking of some of Jesus' teaching about the coming of the Son of Man and the new creation, and the early church's experience of the real events which surrounded the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD. The end result is apocalyptic.

The Jerusalem Temple's destruction was at least as harrowing as the destruction of the twin World Trade Towers in NY; in fact, much more so. The destruction of the

Temple, the most sacred of sites for Jews, was akin to the destruction of a whole religious way of life. It was an event which triggered the feeling - 'the end of the world is coming.'

Let me tell you a little about what happened.

The Romans came to power in Palestine around 63 years before Jesus was born. So throughout Jesus' life, the land in which he lived was colonized and ruled by a foreign power. In 66 AD, around 30 - 35 years after Jesus was crucified, the Jews in Palestine rose up against the Romans. They managed to hold out for quite some time. Josephus tells us that an incredible 1.1 million people perished in the resulting 3 year siege. The figure is likely to be an exaggeration, but it gives us a sense of the calamity of it. In the end, the Jews were crushed by four legions of the Roman Army which laid siege to the city of Jerusalem and then, in 70 AD, destroyed the Temple itself.

The only portion of the Temple left standing was the western wall, sometimes called the wailing wall. That part of the old Temple is still shown in television coverage today when we watch Jews saying prayers pressed up close upon that western wall.

I am sorry to be turning this sermon into a history tutorial but this is all important stuff in coming to an understanding of Luke 21, which is in fact all about those events.

To understand Luke 21 and why it is tied to the Roman siege of Jerusalem, we also need to understand Mark chapter 13.

Mark's Gospel was the first of the Gospels to be written, and it was authored during this time of siege and destruction in Jerusalem. Interestingly, Mark chapter 13 contains the same teachings, in the same order and using almost precisely the same language and phrasing, as Luke chapter 21. (You may like to look at that in the pew Bibles - pages 825 & 856) When Luke wrote his Gospel, he had a copy of Mark's Gospel in front of him because, not only do Mark 13 and Luke 21 show remarkable similarities, there are many other examples spread throughout. The material in Luke chapter 21, therefore, is really a 'copy' of what was written by Mark right around the time of this major historical crisis - the destruction of the Temple.

It is no wonder that Jesus' teaching about the end time was interpreted and shown to fit with this dreadful and violent event.

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So that's the history. Luke chapter 21 should be read as an example of apocalyptic writing - not predictions. Jesus' teaching, and this real event, were brought together while the event was being experienced. What, then, does Luke 21 have to do with us? Should we file it, or listen to it?

It is clear that at some stage, perhaps on a number of occasions, Jesus spoke of the passing away of the old world and the coming of the new creation. Beginning with Mark, the early Church began to believe that this teaching of Jesus was being fulfilled by the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans. This was taken as a sign that the end was coming right now!

But that time has passed and we can say, without belittling their faith, that the earliest Christians were wrong. The end of the world did not come. We are still going, some 2,000 years later. All sorts of attempts have been made to explain why they got it wrong. But that completely misses the point. If we understand the context behind Luke 21, as we have tried to do here, then we know that to treat this sort of passage like history that either came true or did not - as predictions that proved prophetic or not - is a mistake.

The point is found not in the predictions but in the teachings of Jesus which, in continuity with the prophets of Israel before him, provide us with the hope that the future belongs to God. When we strip back the colourful elements, that is the simple message. The future is in the hands of God. The future of Israel. Jesus' future. Our future.

Our creations will not last forever. Jesus' statements in Luke 21 are prompted by a comment about how beautiful the Temple was. What permanence there is to that grand structure! What large stones and beautiful colonnades! How pleased we are that gifts are offered to God in such majestic surrounds! We really have built something here, alright!

And Jesus says: As for these things that you see, the day will come when not one stone will be left upon another... Beware that you not be led astray.

There is something special here about Jesus and a challenging word for the church.

The special thing about Jesus is his clarity of vision. That is a rare gift in even the calmest of times. It is even more so when times are far from calm. Plenty of people have opinions when things are going wrong. But clarity of vision and an ability to place a difficult situation in a bigger context, takes great wisdom and great courage. In the turbulence of Roman occupied Palestine with revolutionaries and all manner of scheming about what to do, Jesus reminds his listeners of this central pillar of their faith - the future belongs to God... Don't place your trust in anything else.

The challenging word for the church is bound up with our answer to the question: To what or to whom do we think the future belongs?

I find it amazing to sit through Presbytery and Synod meetings and hear of all sorts of techniques being employed to 'secure the future of the church' and to 'get the church relevant again' without a hint of there having been clarity of vision about where we are going: a vision focussed on the one to whom we belong.

There is a question for us at a personal level here as well. John Howard and Kevin Rudd are asking us - Who will you trust to keep interest rates low? It is getting painful. Luke Gospel is asking, who will you trust with your future?

Any journey we take where the destination is known will be shaped by that end point. The way we travel is chosen to help us get there. Ways which will not help are left alone. If we know the future belongs to God, how are we going to get there? I am not trying to be inclusive or exclusive, liberal or evangelical! when I remind you of these words: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me." In Jesus day that "but by me" was saying - You will not come to God by Temple, or ritual, or sacrifice. You will, however, be able to find the way to God "by me".

The church, which is not buildings but people, must allow itself to be shaped by the One who is its future, and by the One who we believe can show us the way.