

Advent Sunday 2018

It is very easy, is it not, to be completely confident and totally wrong?

Take for example this emphatic statement from 1969: 'it will be many years, and certainly not in my lifetime, before this country has a woman Prime Minister.' The source? One Margaret Hilda Thatcher.

Or how about this, from Decca Music corporation to the agent for a new band in 1962, explaining why they wouldn't be getting a contract: 'We don't like their sound, and guitar groups are on the way out, Mr Epstein.' The Beatles were forced to look elsewhere.

Or more tragically, David Lloyd George in July 1914, giving the Mansion House speech and surveying Britain's place in the world: 'never, in the field of foreign relations, has the sky been so perfectly blue.' July 1914.

And then there's Jesus of Nazareth, round about AD 33: 'Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away till all these things have taken place'. This generation will not pass away till all these things have taken place.

What things? Why - the darkening of the sun, the stars falling from heaven, the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great glory. It sounds like the end of the world.

And it didn't happen. And that becomes for many a reason for not taking Jesus very seriously. How could He be who Christians think He is, and be so wrong on something so important?

However, the interesting thing is: if you were one of the first hearers of Mark's Gospel, the odds are that when you got to Chapter 13, verse 24, 'Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things happen' you would look around you, and you would say, 'yes, that's right. It happened, just like he said.' This is not a failed prophecy, this is prophecy come true.

And what you would be thinking of would indeed be the end of the world – or at least the end of the world as you knew it. You'd be talking of the Temple lying in ruins, of large swathes of Jerusalem reduced to smoking rubble, of horrendous violence and mass death across the Holy Land. That's what happened in 70AD, a mere forty years or so after Jesus spoke. To your average first century Jew, that was the end of the world. I toyed with climbing into the pulpit this morning and announcing sombrely that I'd just heard that Parliament, Buckingham Palace, St Pauls and Westminster Abbey had all been bombed, and all destroyed. That the Royal Family were missing, presumed dead; what was left of the Government fled into underground bunkers. The shock that would have caused you, the sense of overwhelming crisis – that's just a frisson of what the ruined Temple, devastated Jerusalem meant to Mark's first hearers. The stars might as well have fallen from the sky. For a faithful Jew in AD70 the world had caved in. Life was full of sound and fury, signifying nothing – it was as if God's good creation was undone, wrecked forever. The world had ended. Mark 13 was prophecy fulfilled, not prophecy failed.

And because it was prophecy fulfilled, it was also vindication for the prophet – vindication for Jesus. He had been right all along. When He had declared God’s judgement against the Temple and the priests - against their whole way of running things, against their corruption and their whole understanding of God – he had been right. He had not just been a lunatic fringe preacher, an unstable rabble rouser. He had been speaking God’s Word, enacting God’s judgement. The ruin of the Temple showed who He was – showed, for Mark, not just that he’d been right about the Temple but right about God, right about Israel, right in what He claimed for Himself. He was the one like a Son of Man, one of the classic images in the Bible for the righteous who suffer for God’s sake, whom the world persecutes and kills, but who are in the end vindicated by God, enthroned in the heavens with power and great glory.

All of which is a reasonably interesting history and how to read the Bible lesson – but what difference does it make to you? Why does it matter for us, twenty first century English Christians what first century Jews thought about their Temple and what happened to it? Why does it matter what *Jesus* thought about it, even if he was proved right?

The answer is that Jesus’ teaching about the Temple, and about the short-term future of Israel in the years and decades after his ministry – the time of ‘this generation’, as he puts it – is part of a bigger story, a way of seeing the world. And if he was *right* about the short-term, *right* about the Temple, maybe we need to consider that He was right about the bigger story too.

What’s the bigger story? It’s that history is not just one damned thing after another, year after year after year going nowhere, meaning nothing, with no purpose, no goal. Time is not just destined to march on, or to wind down, to fizzle out into death. No. The world was made by a good God, made to be the perfect expression of his joy. Human beings were made to understand that, and to make it happen. History was to be about God and us coming together in a great fusion of joy, a great celebration – what the Bible often calls the great wedding feast. Jesus didn’t come to teach us how to be good, or how to pray, or how to escape from the world, or even how to make the world just that little bit better. He came to tell us that the world was God’s, and that it would one day be filled with his justice and joy, and He came to make this happen through his Cross and Resurrection. That’s the big story of which the judgement on the Temple is just one part.

And that’s the big story we need to remember. Being a Christian is about believing the big story, belonging *in* the big story. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, we say in the Creed. Words it is sometimes difficult to give precise content to, to imagine *exactly* what they mean but which at least mean this: the whole human story, the whole *world* story is a story with an ending – and that that ending will happen through Jesus, in Jesus. Everyone, and everything, will find their destiny in Him. They will be filled with his justice and with his joy.

View the world like that, and it makes all the difference. Our collective story is not all battles and bad news and tears; our individual stories do not end in decline and failure. We end in Jesus. *We end in Jesus.* We are going to be taken up into joy and beauty and grace beyond what we can begin to imagine. That is our Advent hope. May it burn brightly inside us all.

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