

Jesus will return, what should we do?

Mark 13:32-37 - Littlebourne 13th February 2022

We're looking this week at the end of the longest teaching passage in Mark's gospel, what's known as the Olivet Discourse, considered by most as the hardest passage in the gospel to interpret.

People have very differing interpretations of parts of this passage, as well as very different outlooks on how this informs our faith. On the one hand, if the events, or some of the events, prophesied by Jesus came to pass in AD 70 at the destruction of the Temple and the siege of Jerusalem, then we have some clear proof of Jesus' ability to predict the future, to prophesy. We know all the gospels were written prior to 70 AD, so when Matthew, Mark and Luke talk about this prophesy, we can be certain that Jesus could predict these events.

On the other hand, some point to parts of this passage that did not seem to take place and call in to question Jesus' power because of this. Bertrand Russell wrote in his book 'Why I am not a Christian' that he read the Olivet Discourse and sees that Jesus predicted his coming back, on the clouds of glory, within the disciples lifetime. He says that this didn't happen, certainly not literally, so he adds that to his reasons why he rejects Christ.

There's a spectrum of interpretation when it comes to this whole chapter. At one extreme, there are 'Full Preterists'. These are those that believe that all the prophecy has been fulfilled in the first century. There are at the other extreme 'Full Futurists', who believe that the events prophesied have not yet taken place.

The truth may well lie somewhere in the middle - possibly in a dual fulfilment of what Jesus prophesies, both first century and in the future. I find myself drawn to a moderate Preterist position, at least for this passage in particular, and possibly around half of the book of Revelation, but I don't think any position is outside the realms of possibility. It's not something I've read enough about... and yet here I am telling you all about it...

Regardless of the position we hold as to when these events will or have taken place, the ending of this passage gives us some advice on how we should live in light of the rest of this prophetic chapter. I think the advice Jesus gives here is not limited to the disciples he was talking to - this was recorded for all Christians through time to make use of.

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

We've all heard those predictions of when Jesus is coming back - people study the bible and apply esoteric numerology to determine just when the world will end, Christ will return and whatever weird eschatological system you might hold to is set in motion.

A relatively recent example that gained some traction was Harold Camping, in the United States - he made several failed predictions for Judgement Day falling in September 1994. Then in 2005, he predicted the second coming of Christ would be on May 21st 2011. For years up to the event, this was widely publicised by him and his radio show, then May 21st came and went and he went rather silent. A false prophet by any description.

Similarly, the Jehovah's Witnesses have had several dates they have believed the end of the world will take place. 1914 was supposed to be the start of the great tribulation - not that unreasonable at the time maybe, but no longer really feasible. 1975 was another supposedly big date that came and went, then the story was that the generation of 1914 would all be alive until the end, but after that it was all over. Since 1995, the official position has been that the end is imminent, with no further qualification. Again, lots of false prophecies, wrong every time.

Jesus tells us that the exact time of his coming is withheld from his church. That he will come is certain. When that is, is hidden from us.

Why would this be so? Possibly, because knowing exactly how long we have got is a way to make excuses - on the one hand we may have time yet, on the other hand, we don't have time. We are in a state of constant expectation - Christ is coming, but we don't know when.

If we take a mainstream futurist view, had the disciples known that two thousand years later, Christ still would not have not returned, they would possibly be despondent. Likewise for all the many Christians down the centuries, who would not live to see Christ's return. Were they to know of the dark times that would take place, the oppression and trials that faithful Christians were to go through, they might have had a different attitude. But to expect that Christ could return at any moment, we are encouraged to keep short accounts with God, to make what may well be our last moments count, to live always ready to meet Him.

Now the end of this verse - 'not even the angels in heaven', now that's fine, they aren't privy to that information, I can understand that. But then 'nor the Son, but only the Father'. That's harder to interpret.

The common answer to this is that Jesus is talking while he is on earth - the incarnate Son of God, fully human as well as fully divine. Whilst limited to his body during his life on earth, he does forgo some of the aspects of his divinity. Obvious things would be that he is not omnipresent - he's confined to one place - although we usually describe God as being omnipresent.

Likewise, he sets aside his omnipotence, his perfect complete knowledge of everything, in his incarnate body. Jesus at this point in time does not know when he will return in power, be that in 70 AD or in the much further future.

When Jesus performs miracles or has supernatural knowledge, he does so in the power of the Spirit, directed by the Father - remember that Christ means anointed one, that is anointed with the Spirit of God (see Isaiah 11:1-3).

Philippians 2:7-8:

[He] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus at this point does not know the day or the hour, but as he is now exalted in heaven, he surely does know all the details of his return.

But I don't think that we should take this phrase as being a deep theological minefield into which we should wade. I don't think Mark intended us to necessarily ponder the nature of Jesus' mind, but rather the point of this is to underscore that nobody on earth knows of the precise moment that Jesus returns.

v33

33 Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.

Since we don't know when the time will come, we should be on guard and keep awake.

We've seen this phrase 'be on guard' earlier in this chapter - verse 21-23:

21 And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. 22 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. 23 But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

One thing we must be on guard against is false christs and false prophets.

Some copies of the gospel add 'and pray' - be on guard, keep awake and pray. It's suggested that maybe this is possibly an addition influenced by chapter 14 verse 38, where Jesus tells Peter as they are in the garden of Gethsemane and the disciples keep falling asleep: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation."

Whether the command to pray as well as keep watch was in the original, whether that's what Jesus truly said or not, it strikes me as good advice.

v34-37

34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. 35 Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— 36 lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

Now Jesus gives us this illustration or parable, unique to Mark's account of the Olivet Discourse, about how to act in light of the fact that no one knows the time of his return.

Before this passage, we had the illustration of the fig tree in verse 28 and 29:

28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

This illustration tells us that we might be aware of the signs of Jesus' coming - looking for what precedes his coming can inform us of what we must do.

The illustration today tells us that also we can't know exactly when, but should be prepared at all times. We are not to be complacent because we don't see the signs of Christ's coming yet, or think his return is immediate based on what we hear on the news.

Jesus, bodily, has left earth for the time being and his church is left to keep things going in the meantime before he returns. We are like the servants and the doorkeeper of this story, awaiting the master's return.

Jesus tells us we must be on guard, stay awake. We are to live as if we may meet our master at any point - whether he comes back to judge the living and the dead, as we've said in the Apostle's Creed, or whether we die and go to be with him that way. The things of the world will entice us to fall asleep and not be ready to meet him.

Four time periods are mentioned - evening, midnight, then the rooster crows and dawn. The greek for 'when the rooster crows' refers to the third watch of the night. Night was divided into four watches by the Romans - four periods for standing guard, three hours or so each. Jews divided the night into three watches, but it's thought that Mark has translated for his intended gentile audience. Point is, the whole night is covered, emphasising the unknown time of the master's return.

Jesus also says that the servants each have their own work - we are not to give up and do nothing because tomorrow we might not be here. On the other hand, we might well be here for some time, and the work God has for us is not to stop.

Can we say that we are living at present expectant for Christ's return? What would Jesus think of how we are living now - are we ready to meet him?

Our Savior's concluding words from the Olivet Discourse reveal that the purpose of his teaching was not to encourage the disciples to try to set a date but rather to be ready for the events to come. Though we live some two thousand years after this, these words of warning apply to us today as well. For if the judgement on Jerusalem was a type of Christ's final return to judge all creation, then it is even more important that we be watchful. We do not want to be caught unaware and unprepared for the Lord's final return.

How do we prepare ourselves for the second coming of Christ? The answer is relatively simple: we must make sure that we belong to Jesus as His redeemed people, as His disciples. If you are not a Christian, you will not be ready for the Lord's return. For all of us, there will be a point at which it is too late and that day could be very soon. Repent and trust in Jesus today.

If you are a believer, seek to do his work - be the sort of disciple that will be found ready when the day comes.