

Judgement and Apocalypse

If you look at the material Matthew has put in his gospel between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and his last supper on Maundy Thursday, it reveals some interesting things. For one, the vast majority of these chapters concern the end times, the apocalypse and the last judgement. It's as if Jesus has one, dark, thing on his mind, or he's keen to warn the people of the impending disaster.

After riding in on a donkey, Jesus cleanses the temple - announcing that he is a new broom, come to revive the true meaning of worship, and that from now on we won't relate to God through the old sacrifice system.

He defends his authority to do this, and tells the story of the wedding banquet: those who were invited but never showed up, and the 'outsiders' who were invited in. The wedding feast is a popular allegory for the afterlife, and those who don't attend are sent to the darkness where there will be 'wailing and gnashing of teeth'.

Jesus continues his arguments against the institutions, taking on the Scribes (the law makers), the Sadducees, and finally silencing the Pharisees in open debate. He has made enemies of all these who go away to start making detailed plans to kill him, but he has the crowd firmly on his side. He utters seven "woes" about the Pharisees, undermining their authority, pointing out their hypocrisy, and why they should not be trusted or followed. Jesus is openly and plainly attacking them, and the old style religion they stand for.

Next he warns the about the 'end times', or apocalypse, how terrible it will be. How there will be people claiming to be false messiah's, and how true followers will be persecuted. He speaks of judgement - two working and one is taken, a thief in the night - and Jesus seems to be forcing people into that crisis point - you need to decide, he says, who you are following, and you need to decide quickly. More parables of judgment, and being caught out - the wise and foolish virgins, the buried talents, the division of the sheep and the goats. In fact the sheep and goats are not presented as a parable, but a factual account of judgement. And the basis for deciding who goes to the left or the right? Simply what they did, or did not, **do** - their actions alone count.

What is going on here? Is it that Jesus is obsessed with his own death, and a sense of impending doom? If Jesus was fully human, fully like us, as our faith tells us he must be, then he did not know there would be a resurrection. He has spoken of his death several times previously, so it is clear he knows that that is his mission, but I don't think he can know of the kind of resurrection that will happen. Otherwise his cry of forsaken abandonment on the cross is not genuine.

There might be several things going on:

Firstly to warn his disciples and followers, that although things are going to look terrible and bleak - they will see him, not in power, but stripped and ashamed, with all his enemies triumphing over him - although this looks like weakness and failure, in fact, it is not the end, and it is all part of God's plan. Just have faith, and hang in there.

Secondly, that the last days will not be a wonderful, happy time (some Jews believed that the Messiah would usher in a golden age for the Jewish nation, and that they would be lifted out of the mess) - that judgement would be for all, and only after a time of hardship and suffering.

Thirdly, since this judgement is for all, and will be unavoidable, even for Jews, you better make sure you are on the right side? Are you with the judgemental, rule keeping, angry god, Pharisees? Or with the forgiving, loving, Jesus?

Fourthly - you need to work out which side you are on, and start living like it now, because this is going to happen soon. This judgement and end time is immanent. It is possible that Jesus thought his death would bring about the final judgement- that it would be the trigger for the new kingdom in some form or other.

Finally - he is leaving, and doesn't know when or how he'll be back. The last supper and especially the discourse in John's gospel, is full of the heartbreak of a final goodbye. Trying to tie up loose ends, make sure the disciples, his closest friends, will be ok. So he needs to make sure

they remember the essentials; although it will look bad, trust God; make the right choice; and make it now - tomorrow may be too late.

It is certainly a shock to read this material, it is not like the Jesus 'gentle and mild' that we often talk about. There are no healings, no forgiveness, no promises of eternal life - just the grim picture of judgement and the warnings. All I can take from this is that Jesus is being as clear as possible and that this is really important to him. When something really matters, you may start with being nice and sweet talking, but as the threat gets greater, stronger words are called for. Think of how we have been "advised" or "recommended" about the Corona Virus, and then finally there are "orders" and "instructions".

Perhaps I need

- a) to catch some of Jesus' urgency that others make the right choice,
- b) and I definitely need to make sure I live out Jesus commands, that I walk the talk, practice what I preach,
- c) and not be discouraged by suffering or persecution.

Phew! That's a tough to-do list! Help me God, for without you I will fail, and only with you can I succeed. Amen.

.....

Notes

1. When Jesus died, he may well have left time as we know it. To him, coming back at Easter, and the 40 days he spent, may all be outside of chronological time, so that the end times did seem to happen in the blink of an eye to him. Certainly God dwells outside of time, it is part of his creation, so Jesus, as part of the Godhead, is outside of it too. We cannot imagine what that would be like, because we are the created ones, not the creator - but we can at least glimpse that it might be possible.

2. Jesus predictions of the destruction of the temple, and the desolating sacrifice, did in fact happen. Less than 30 years after his death, in AD70, Emperor Vespasian's troops overran Jerusalem, and tore down the temple, and slaughtered a pig on the high altar - using an "unclean" animal to desecrate it and fully insult the Jews.