

Facing the Future (Mark 13.1-8) by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 14th November 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; **Mark 13:1-8**

Introduction: travelling in time

Have you ever wished you could travel in time? Those of us who like science fiction films will be familiar with plots where the characters travel back, or forwards, in time. One example that springs to mind is the 1978 Superman film, where Superman's girlfriend Lois Lane is killed when her car falls into a crevice caused by an earthquake while Superman is busy saving another part of America. To put things right, Superman flies round the world at above the speed of light, enabling him to travel back in time a few minutes to save Lois and prevent other disasters caused by the evil Lex Luther.

Fast forward to 2021: The COP26 Climate Summit over the past 2 weeks has highlighted again the damaging effects of industrialisation and other human behaviour on our beautiful Earth, its rich diversity of life and the most vulnerable members of the human species. Suppose you were able to travel back in time 20, 50 or even 100 years – what would you do to help prevent things getting to the current environmental crisis?

Looking forwards

Of course, we know that it's not possible to travel back in time, at least not in any meaningful way (followers of Einstein or Quantum Mechanics can explain afterwards!). We can't influence what *has* happened. But we can influence what *will* happen, because the future is created by what we do in the present. That is why the decisions made at this conference, and even more importantly, the implementation of those decisions, is crucial for the protection of our planet and all life on it.

So what will be the outcome of the measures that countries have committed to? What difference will our own individual efforts make, as we make changes to our own lifestyles, by switching to electric cars, eating less meat and switching off lights we aren't using? Will we meet the target of reducing global warming? And if not, will the consequences be as dire as scientists have predicted?

Jesus warns of trouble ahead

Let's wind back 2,000 years. When the disciples of Jesus pointed out to him the beauty and grandeur of the Temple as they sat on the Mount of Olives, they had no idea what events would unfold in the following 4 decades, culminating in the total destruction of that Temple by the Roman armies. They must have been shocked when Jesus replied that everything they were looking at would be violently torn down.

And that was not all. Jesus went on to talk of false prophets, wars, earthquakes and famines, and of the persecution of his followers¹. All of this came to pass over the next few years.

¹ Verses 9-13

The Jewish historian Josephus writes of several false prophets in this period²; the Acts of the Apostles tells us about the famine that took place during the reign of the Emperor Claudius³, and Josephus also mentions a famine around 46 AD⁴. In AD 62 an earthquake hit the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It had an intensity of X [Roman ten], which compares with the 2015 Nepal earthquake whose intensity was IX⁵. They still hadn't recovered when Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, destroying both cities.

Everything that Jesus prophesied came true, including the persecution of his followers. But the biggest disaster for the Jewish people, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, was entirely avoidable, just as the destruction of the previous Temple in 587 BC by Nebuchadnezzar was entirely avoidable. Then, the prophet Jeremiah had pleaded with the people and with their rulers to turn back to God and to change their ways, but his appeals met with opposition and imprisonment. Six hundred years later, Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives, as he approached Jerusalem for his last Passover, and wept over the city with these words:

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The

² Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.13 (also mentioned in Acts 21:38), *Antiquities* 20.5

³ Acts 11:27-30

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.49-53. Other Roman writers mention famines in different parts of the Empire in this period.

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Notable-Earthquakes-in-History-1830590>. *Intensity* (shown with Roman numerals) measures the level of damage caused, as opposed to the *magnitude* of the tremors (Richter scale).

days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.⁶

So how should we think about the future?

Like me, you may be thinking that Jesus' predictions about the future must have made for some depressing listening for his disciples. But Jesus' intention was not to depress them but to make them ready for what was to come. There are some ways in which we *can* influence the future, and there are some things that are out of our control. But whatever the future holds, our attitude can make all the difference to our ability to handle what comes our way.

So let's look at what Jesus said in these verses from Mark to see what lessons we can apply to ourselves.

In verses 1-2 there is a contrast between the disciples' wonder at the beauty of the Temple and Jesus' prediction that it will be pulled down. The Temple of Jesus' time had been massively rebuilt and expanded by Herod the Great, and was still being finished at the time of Jesus. Its magnificence was famous throughout the Roman world, and its sacrificial system was well-run and extensive, partly funded by a Temple tax on all Jewish adult males⁷. The High Priest and the aristocratic Jewish families acted as a kind of puppet administration under the Roman Governor, and had

⁶ Luke 19:42-44 (NIV)

⁷ See Matthew 17:24

a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and suppressing any source of dissent. As long as nothing changed, they were happy. But under the surface there were a lot of grievances, not only against the Roman occupation, but against corruption and against wealthy landowners who exploited the poor. The historical works of Josephus show how all of these undercurrents contributed to the Jewish revolt of 66 AD and to the final disaster of the Temple's destruction in 70 AD.

So I think the warning we should take from this is *Don't be complacent!* Jesus saw that the leaders of the people did not understand the things that would make for peace. We too need to understand the signs of the present times. The refugee and migrant crisis is only going to get worse if the situations that cause people to migrate – war, poverty and climate change - are not addressed. The current situation on the Belarus/Polish border and the continuous stream of migrants crossing the English Channel are symptoms of bigger problems. Poverty and perceived injustice also drives vulnerable people into the arms of terrorist organisations.

In verses 5 and 6, Jesus warns against false prophets who come saying "I am he" and lead many astray. Just as the early church had to guard against false teachers and false promises, so we too need to be suspicious of simple answers to complex issues, both outside the church and within it. Secular ideology is just as dangerous for the church as fundamentalism. So the second warning for us today is *Don't be gullible!* Test everything against the standards of God's Kingdom and against Scripture. We need experts to

help us understand complex issues. But not everyone who claims to be an expert gives impartial advice.

The third message I get from today's reading is one of much-needed reassurance. *Don't be alarmed!* - Jesus says in verse 7. "This must take place, but the end is still to come". God knows what's going on in the world and how things will turn out. In spite of the mistakes and machinations of humans, God has a plan to bring good out of it and to make it all right in the end. Jesus warns his disciples of the troubles to come so that we learn to trust in God for wisdom, direction and the power to do what is asked of us, and promises that "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (verse 13).

Conclusion: Facing the Future

There are many uncertainties about the world we now live in. Some things we have the power to influence; some are outside of our control. Just as Jesus prepared his early disciples for the troubles that lay ahead, so he wants us to be prepared too.

Let's not be complacent, thinking that the safest thing is for nothing to change, when in fact change is needed to avert disaster.

Let's not be gullible, being led astray by superficial answers to complex problems and by those who have an agenda that is hostile to the Christian message.

And let's not be alarmed – however uncertain the future may be, and whatever chaos reigns around us, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."⁸

⁸ Psalm 46:1 (NRSV)