

Sunday 1st December – Advent Sunday (1st of Advent): Luke 21:25-36 ‘The Second Advent’

If I had to pick my favourite album of all time, I would probably go for Revolver by the Beatles. Beatles fans will always argue as to whether Revolver or Sergeant Pepper is the greatest, but for me, it's Revolver – it's the exact tipping point between the perfect pop songs of their early career, and the extraordinary experimental stuff they went on to do, which changed the face of music forever.

The album itself is full of classics that lots of people know and love: Eleanor Rigby, Yellow Submarine, Taxman, Good Day Sunshine. But very few people know the track at the end of the album, which is called Tomorrow Never Knows. When Tomorrow Never Knows comes on, it's like listening to music from another planet. And the lyrics are just as strange – this is how it begins: 'Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream, it is not dying; lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void, it is shining.'

And so it goes on – it's totally strange, utterly brilliant and effectively began the revolution in music that led to most of the great forms of rock and pop over the following decades. We couldn't have much of the greatest music that's been made since without Tomorrow Never Knows – but even now, listening nearly 60 years after it was made, it's hard to know what to make of it. *What does it all mean?*

Forgive the analogy, but we face exactly the same challenge with Luke chapter 21 in the gospels. We switch from the greatest band of all time to the greatest teacher of all time. The gospels are full of stories we love, and the most profound wisdom ever uttered by anyone, which gets right to the heart of what it means to be human. And we'll all have our favourite parables, our favourite sayings of Jesus.

And yet, right near the end of the gospels we get Tomorrow Never Knows – this large chunk of teaching which is like music from another planet. And it's really important teaching – Matthew, Mark and Luke all have it – it's about 30 verses in Mark, 50 verses in Matthew and here in Luke, who I think almost certainly had Mark's gospel in front of him and edited Mark's content to make it just a little bit more comprehensible for non-Jewish readers, it's also about 30 verses. In other words, take out all the narrative from the gospels, so you've only got Jesus' actual teaching, and **this section is about 10% of all Jesus teaching in the gospels – and yet how often do any of us read it?** We might get it once a year on the first Sunday of Advent. The rest of the time we don't go near it.

And yet, like Tomorrow Never Knows for the history of music, **this teaching is fundamental to Jesus' message, and changed the course of history forever.** The early church lived in the confident expectation of Jesus' imminent return, his second coming, his second *Advent*, precisely because of this teaching of Jesus in Luke 21 (or Mark 13 or Matthew 24). Like Tomorrow Never Knows, the revolution starts here!

We've only got a chunk of it today, which is practical, but to help us get a handle on it, I'm going to look briefly at the whole chapter, to give us just a fighting chance of getting our heads round it. The setting is Holy Week: Jesus has entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, been celebrated as the new king, and has been teaching in the temple courts all week. As they've spent time in the temple, his friends the disciples remark to him, in passing, on what a beautiful set of buildings it is. In reply, Jesus makes the somewhat startling observation as recorded in v6: 'As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.' The first-century equivalent of the awkward dinner-party conversation killer!

The disciples are confused; so, Jesus then takes the rest of the chapter explaining what he means. And here we encounter one of those things we see in lots of Old Testament prophecy – and, as we've observed before, it's a bit like looking at a mountain range in the distance. What we can see is one peak – but what we don't know is that, when we get to that peak, there's *another* peak beyond it.

And it's exactly like that here. The destruction of the temple Jesus is referring to is an actual historical event: there was a big Jewish rebellion in the late 60s AD which was brutally crushed by the Roman army. Jerusalem was subjected to a terrible siege and the temple was utterly destroyed in AD70, just as Jesus predicted. The only bit left was a part of one wall, which is still there and is now known as the world-famous Wailing Wall on the Temple Mount in modern-day Jerusalem.

The story is told very powerfully by the Jewish historian Josephus about 20 or 30 years later – and one of the things he describes shows us that **this prophecy of Jesus at the time was very well known by the early Christian communities**. When the rebellion started, Josephus paints this extraordinary picture of all the roads leading to Jerusalem, with two lines of people, going in different directions. Lots of devout Jews were heading *into* Jerusalem, while the Christians were getting *out*. And they got out precisely because of what Jesus says here in this teaching: (v20-21 just before our text) ‘When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its destruction is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out.’ Matthew and Mark both add the following telling phrase to their account of this: ‘let the reader understand.’ The Christians who read or knew this teaching saw the signs – they got out, and were spared the terrible violence that followed.

So, the basic context of the prophecy in Luke 21 is about the destruction of the temple 40 years later – in other words within the lifetime of some of Jesus’ friends listening at the time – so this is prophecy which is verifiable. BUT – the million-dollar question – does it *only* refer to this? Does it go beyond, to a bigger peak in the distance? Whole libraries have been written on this question – but the safest approach is to look at the actual text and see if we can make sense of it: because from v25, the start of our passage today, it does seem like Jesus starts talking about something else. By v27 we get this: ‘At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.’ **The end of time, the final judgment, God’s restoration of all things.**

Quite obviously that didn’t happen in AD70, we’re stood here in 2024 talking about it – so Jesus is now looking beyond the first peak to the second peak: his coming again. And the text does give us a clue: ‘At that time...’ Not at *this* time – at that time. So, we’re now looking beyond AD70 to the rest of human history. Why does Jesus suddenly switch?

This is the key to the whole passage, which, once you realise this, becomes very simple, in a strange way. The point is that the world will always be in turmoil at some level. There will be wars and natural disasters in every age; sadly, it’s a part of our fallen world. There will also be persecution of Jesus’ followers; sadly, that is also a part of life in our fallen world. Jesus has said this often to the disciples, but he repeats it here: you should expect this kind of stuff. It will be your reality for the coming decades. But don’t quit, because I am with you – or as he says: (v19) ‘Stand firm, and you will win life.’

This basic encouragement remains true after AD70 – so, as Jesus talks with his friends about standing firm in a chaotic world for the next few decades, it’s natural that he broadens that out to be teaching for all of us, for the rest of time. **It’s the same encouragement: this stuff will keep being a part of our world, but the simple teaching is the same: ‘Stand firm, and you will win life.’**

How do we do this in practice? Essentially it comes down to two simple bits of practical advice: keep watch, and live ready. ‘Be always on the watch,’ Jesus says (v36). That’s what the early Christians did, and saved themselves in AD70 – but it’s also true for us now. We keep watch, we understand the signs of the times. We don’t create wild prophecies or turn the bible into code, but we do understand that this is how the world is. And because we keep watch, we live ready. Jesus talks quite bluntly in verse 34-35 about living a holy life, because Jesus might come at any time, and we don’t know when. Living just for ourselves is like presuming that Jesus will never return – don’t do it, he says: keep watch, and live ready; live in a way that it doesn’t really matter when I come back, because you’re ready to receive me. Tomorrow Never Knows.

As we begin Advent today, we remind ourselves that **Advent in particular is a season of keeping watch and getting ready** – not so much our parties or our present lists, but our *hearts*. And it’s traditional on the first Sunday of Advent to think less about Jesus first coming, than his second – the return he talks about here. Or rather, the point is – if we get ready properly for his first coming, we’ll be ready for his second. It’s challenging, but it’s also about hope: ‘lift up your heads,’ Jesus says, ‘for your redemption is drawing near.’ May we prepare our hearts this season, that we might win life. Amen, come Lord Jesus.