

13 November 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Luke 21:5-19

On New Year's Eve 1999 I was enjoying a party at the home of a friend and colleague, located on a hill overlooking the valleys of Tawa and Porirua. It was a warm night and we were out on the deck when the clock struck midnight. After the initial chorus of "Happy New Year", hugs and handshakes, clinking of glasses and so on, something unusual happened. My colleague got out his mobile phone and checked for a signal; and we all looked out across the valleys to see – not only the skyrockets being let off from one or two homes – but the lights of homes and streetlamps still twinkling. There was a bit of a collective sigh of relief.

Most of us present worked in companies that were at risk of the so-called "Y2K bug". The concern was that as the year clicked over into the new millennium we would be faced with chaos as computer systems set up with date formats using only two digits to represent the year would confuse the year 2000 with the year 1900. I was among many people involved in project teams set up in the years leading up to that date to, as comprehensively as possible, identify all the computer systems that were at risk and to make the necessary modifications. Despite all the preparatory work, and the many millions of dollars spent, there was still a risk that something had been missed that could take down a system or network.

Over twenty years on, some have claimed that the whole issue was a hoax. The anticipated crisis did not eventuate as we entered the 2000s. However, the fact that there were some isolated problems - ranging from a comically absurd century's worth of late fees at a video rental store to a malfunction at a nuclear plant in Tennessee – demonstrates that the problem was indeed real, and that the crisis was averted because it was foreseen and action had been taken to prevent it.<sup>1</sup>

Amid the uncertainty leading up to 2000, some people stocked up on food, water, candles and matches on so on; and, in the US in particular, guns and ammunition were stockpiled. All this was in anticipation of some kind of computer-induced

---

<sup>1</sup> Francine Uenuma, "20 Years Later, the Y2K Bug Seems Like a Joke—Because Those Behind the Scenes Took It Seriously" TIME, December 30, 2019, <https://time.com/5752129/y2k-bug-history/>

widespread disaster scenario, a kind of apocalypse. Some, based on their reading of texts such as Luke 21, even went so far as to believe that the world was coming to an end.

When we come to Luke 21 we have to be clear about what period we are in. We are, unfortunately, not well served by the publishers of our Bibles who typically have labelled much of chapter 21 along the lines of “Signs of the end times”. These paragraph headings – which are not in the original biblical text – misdirect our thinking about the text, pointing us to thoughts of the end of the present age, the return of Jesus, judgement and so on. And from there it is but a small leap to start looking for the signs, looking for the events that will signal that the end times are upon us. We need to remember that many before us have tried and failed in their prophesying of the end of the world.

While the later verses of the chapter (those that come after the part set down for our reading today) do seem to get into such events that still lie ahead of us, the first part is much closer in time to Jesus and his audience. Jesus is prophesying the destruction of the Temple and a cataclysmic attack leading to the fall of Jerusalem. These particular events are indeed placed by Jesus within the context of the last days, the time leading up to the end of the world. But we need to remember that there is no timetable given for this “last days” period – it is a time that stretches from the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, through the particular events in Jerusalem, into our own time now, and beyond ... for who knows how long.

The end of the Temple was not going to signify that the end had *come*, but it did foreshadow the judgement that awaits the entire world at the end of history. Chaos is not in itself a sign of the end, but it is a sign of human fallenness throughout the ages. Chaos comes as the natural outworking of human rebellion against the ways of God: it is not a sign of the end, but it is a clear sign that the end – *God’s* planned end to the present age and setting the world to rights – is needed.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus prophesied the devastation of the Temple and Jerusalem. And these events did in fact take place. The first Temple (the one built during Solomon’s reign) had

---

<sup>2</sup> Garland, *Luke*, pp.829, 834.

been destroyed in 587BC by the Babylonians. In 18BC King Herod had ordered the restoration of the Temple. He wanted something in keeping with the original splendour of Solomon's Temple, but enlarged the complex. After eight years' labour (in 10BC) the new edifice was opened for services. Work was still continuing about forty years later at the time that Jesus and his disciples had the conversation recorded in Luke's gospel, but even at that time it would have been a magnificent structure. Masonry work from that period was noted for its excellence. It would have had weight and an image of permanence. The Temple was finally completed in about AD 64. It was destroyed just 6 years later.

What came to be termed "the Great Revolt" began in the year 66, during Nero's reign.<sup>3</sup> There were Jewish protests against Roman taxation, and attacks upon Roman citizens. The Roman governor responded by plundering the Temple and arresting numerous senior Jewish figures. This prompted widespread rebellion in Jerusalem that culminated in the capture of the Roman military garrison by rebel forces. To quell the unrest the Syrian army was brought in. After initial advances into Jewish territory, the Syrian Legion was ambushed and defeated by Jewish rebels at the Battle of Beth Horon. In that same year, a Judean provisional government was formed in Jerusalem led by a former High Priest. But then there was civil war among various Jewish factions. Leaders arose one after the other, each heralded as Messiah, only to be defeated and expelled or executed by the new government.

The Roman general Vespasian was given four legions and tasked by Nero with crushing the rebellion. Assisted by forces of Jewish king-in-exile Agrippa II, Vespasian invaded Galilee in 67, and within several months had taken the territory. Driven from Galilee, Zealot rebels and thousands of refugees arrived in Jerusalem, creating tensions and bitter infighting between them and the mainly Sadducee leaders in Jerusalem. In 69, Vespasian was called to Rome and appointed emperor, leaving Titus to besiege Jerusalem in the year 70. Following a brutal seven-month siege, during which Zealot infighting resulted in the burning of the entire food supplies of the city, the Romans finally succeeded in breaching the defences in the

---

<sup>3</sup> The following comes largely from the Wikipedia article "First Jewish Roman War", abridged and adapted. Garland, *Luke*, pp.827-834 also provides references to the actual events, quoting from Roman and Jewish historical sources.

summer of 70. The Temple of Jerusalem and much of the city was destroyed by fire and the Jewish community was thrown into turmoil by the devastation of its political and religious leadership.

So in AD 70 Jesus was proven right in his prophecy.  
Why would Jesus make such a prophecy?

There are two reasons.

The first is that Jesus, through making this prophecy, provided reassurance for his followers in the decades that followed. When they started to see these cataclysmic events unfolding, they would be able to recall his words and to thus gain a sense of perspective that would keep them from being overly fearful. What is going on in the world is ultimately going to be brought under the loving reign of God.

The second reason I have alluded to already: so that Jesus could be proven right. The fact that some 30+ years after his death and resurrection Jesus' prophecy would be found to have been accurate means that he would be shown to have been right in his assessment of how things were. By the time of Jesus, the Temple had become symbolic of Israel's failure to fulfil its role in God's plan, and Jesus had said much about these issues.<sup>4</sup>

So Jesus' prophecy about the Temple and Jerusalem had primary application to those who lived in the period following his resurrection and ascension up to the actual unfolding of the events prophesied.

The context of Luke 21 may be that particular time long ago, but Jesus' words have application to us today too. Their application is most obvious to those who are undergoing persecution for their faith: people in places of Islamic or Buddhist or Hindu fundamentalism, or in places with despotic regimes. While that audience is the most obvious we can too see the application to us here in New Zealand. We increasingly face the challenge of an increasingly non-Christian society, in which a generalised vague spirituality is strangely wedded to ignorance of the Good News

---

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Luke*, p.252

and to active moves to restrict expression of overtly Christian values in the public square.

So what does Jesus challenge us to do?

“Let no one deceive you”, he says. We live in a time of increasing misinformation and disinformation; we live in a time where informed debate seems to be more and more giving way to shouting slogans, labelling, and cancelling those who have differing views; we live in a time where the false gods of consumerism, health, wealth and happiness, are dressed up as the gospel in some parts of the church.

We need to be at work resolutely, but winsomely, countering these tendencies.

This includes ensuring that we get our own understanding straight. When Paul writes about idle meddlers or busybodies he may well have been referring to people who had been led astray into thinking that Christ has already returned and therefore no longer need to hold fast to what they have been taught. Or he could be referring to preachers and missionaries who turn up demanding that they be supported without having to work, profiting from proclaiming the gospel.<sup>5</sup> Recent experience here in New Zealand shows how even the non-Christian world takes a dim view of profiteering from gospel work. Christians should be the last to be so deceived.

“You will have a chance to tell your story”, says Jesus. In fact, if we look for it, we have more opportunities than we may recognise to tell our story – our story of what God has done for us, our story of the work of God in the world, our story of hope for the world and for humankind. (And here I would briefly note that when Jesus does eventually go on to talk of the end of the age – and when Paul does so in places like Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15, and when St John the Divine does so in Revelation 21 and 22 – it is something to be looked forward to with joy, because it is the story of the Creator God restoring all things in his perfect love and justice... but that’s a sermon for another time!)

We create opportunities, openings, to tell our story when we ask someone if we might pray for them in a time of need; when we rejoice with someone over something good and beautiful and true; when they wonder why we do what we generously and

---

<sup>5</sup> Wyant, “Commentary”

unexpectedly do for them; when they and we ask what the world is coming to, and so on.

“I’ll give you a voice and wisdom”, says Jesus. Some preachers have, unfortunately, taken these words as licence to go light on their preparation. But the original thought here comes in the context of persecution, and related to the kinds of synagogue and courtroom scenes we find in the book of Acts, where Peter and Paul find themselves equipped with the right words to say as they face their accusers.<sup>6</sup> But there is application to us too as we look for opportunities to tell our story. While there is certainly value in having thought ahead what we might say in response to someone’s questions, to have clear in our mind what the story is, we need too to rest on the assurance of the gift of the Spirit’s wisdom. The Spirit gives us discernment to listen, to hear the heart and the deep, perhaps unspoken, questioning of the person in front of us, and to know what part of our story or *the story* is right to tell right now.

“You’ll keep your souls through patient endurance”, says Jesus. We, in contrast to the Zealots of first century Jerusalem and countless others since, must recognise that persecution is not resisted by resorting to violence.<sup>7</sup> Because death – the last great enemy and ultimate power of the tyrants – is rendered powerless through the promise of resurrection and life in the age to come, we are called simply to endure, to stand fast in the face of what is thrown at us.

---

We live after the fall of Jerusalem, but Jesus’ words to those who would face that event are just as pertinent to us almost two millennia later. We who still wait for the coming of Christ, for the end of the troubles of the present age, and for the new heavens and new earth, need these words of Jesus: Let no one deceive you; You’ll have your chance to tell your story; I’ll give you voice and wisdom; You’ll keep your souls through patient endurance.

---

<sup>6</sup> Garland, *Luke*, pp.830-831; Wright, *Luke*, 252.

<sup>7</sup> Garland, *Luke*, p.832

**Sources:**

- David E Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Zondervan, 2011
- Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001/2004
- Jennifer S Wyant, "Commentary on 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-3/commentary-on-2-thessalonians-36-13-5>
- Debra J Mumford, "Commentary on Luke 21:5-19", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-3/commentary-on-luke-215-19-5>
- Garrett Galvin, "Commentary on Isaiah 65:17-25", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-3/commentary-on-isaiah-6517-25-5>
- Anna Marsh, "Suffering Begone", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/suffering-begone>
- Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year C*, SPCK, 2003
- Ronald W Dale, *Windows on Luke: an anthology to amplify the gospel readings for year C of the lectionary*, Kevin Mayhew, 2000
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays, Year C*, SPCK, 2000
- [First Jewish–Roman War - Wikipedia](#)