

St Andrew's Church, Corbridge Exploring the Bible

Autumn 2024

The Second Coming of Jesus

November 15 In the teaching of St Paul

November 22 In the Gospels

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

The Nicene Creed

How do we think about the idea of Jesus' second coming?

One of the complexities is the second coming is bound up with a number of themes:

- the coming of God's kingdom
- the resurrection of the dead
- the end of the world
- the day of judgment
- the day of the Lord
- the destruction of sin, death and evil.

The most common New Testament word for 'coming' is the Greek word *parousia*, which essentially means *presence*. It was often used in Greek literature of the visits of Emperors and Roman officials to parts of the Empire. It was also used of the action of God or 'the gods' when divine power was manifested.

The New Testament drew on this word to encapsulate the conviction that Jesus would one day manifest his royal *presence* for all to see as the fulfilment of God's saving purposes for creation and humanity.

- Jesus' first coming: in humility, incognito, revealed only to a few (Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi)
- Jesus' second coming: in power and glory, revealed to all: 'every eye will see him' (Revelation 1.7).

Another related word is *revealed* – see 1 John 3.2 '...when he is *revealed*, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is'. The Greek word here is our word 'epiphany' – manifestation, showing forth - Christ's epiphany in his glorified, divine splendour, his transformed and renewed humanity.

Two further introductory points:

1. We have to be aware of the language of *theophany* in the Bible. For example, when God's presence is revealed to Moses (Burning bush, the giving of the Law on Sinai) images of fire, thunder, clouds, earthquakes are used. In Isaiah 6, when Isaiah 'sees the Lord' there is earthquake and smoke (incense). In the narratives of the Transfiguration there is reference to light and cloud; on Calvary there is darkness and an earthquake (Matthew) and an earthquake in Matthew's resurrection account. These images speak of power, divinity, glory, light, fear. When such images appear, they are alerting us to the idea of decisive divine presence and action.
2. The apocalyptic (Greek *apocalypse* = 'revelation', 'uncovering', 'showing forth') tradition of biblical literature. This is quite a late development in the OT (e.g. the Book of Daniel), and came to much greater prominence in the Inter-Testamental period. We find apocalyptic passages like Mark 13, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Jude, 2 Peter, in the NT. Apocalyptic employs vivid language, imagery and symbolism, and is set on an epic scale. NT teaching about the second coming draws on apocalyptic imagery to show its significance.

Recognising the language of theophany and apocalyptic we must be careful not to be simplistic about the second coming. It can be parodied as a 'reverse ascension' in a 'this-worldly' context, as if Jesus was like an astronaut returning to earth, whereas the biblical language points to a cosmic act of dislocation and transformation – hence, it needs the big, colourful and epic language of theophany and apocalyptic.

The Second Coming in Paul

Paul makes many passing references to the second coming or Parousia. His two earliest letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (AD 50/51) are peppered with references to Christ's coming (1 Thess. 1.10, 2.19, 3.13, 4.13-18, 5.2-5; 2 Thess. 1.10, 2.1-10).

Read 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18

What pastoral situation is Paul dealing with here?

What theophany and apocalyptic images can we see in this passage?

A false interpretation: a number of 'adventist' and fundamentalist Christians, interpret this passage very literally. Drawing in Jesus' words in the Gospels that one that day 'there will be two men in a field and one will be taken and the other left, or two women grinding corn and one will be taken and one left', they interpret this passage as describing what they call 'the rapture'. Before the final judgment, the true living followers of Jesus will be taken up from the earth – 'to meet the Lord in the air' and taken to heaven for a time while wickedness has its final frenzy before returning with Christ to earth to reign with him for ever.

The OT background to 1 Thess. 4

- Exodus 19.16-21 God 'coming down' to Sinai and Moses coming down to the people
- Daniel 7.9-14 The coming of the Son of Man

The reference to 'in the air' is a technical term in Greek culture. When a King or high-ranking official was coming to a town or city, a group of citizens would go out in advance to meet him and then escort him to the destination.

Paul is assuring the living Thessalonians, that their dead brothers and sisters will not 'miss out' on the Lord's return but that all Christians, living and departed, will be 'always with the Lord'. So Paul uses the image of the royal visit – we will go 'out'/'up' to meet him and escort him. It is a dramatic picture of the truth that Christ's glory will be revealed and the dead will be raised.

See also Philippians 3.20-21 and Colossians 3.1-4, where Paul directly links the Parousia with the transformation of the Church. And 1 Thessalonians 5. 10-11 which looks back to the living and those 'asleep' – i.e. Christians who have died. Note also, the reference in 1 Thess. 5.1 to the day of the Lord coming as a 'thief in the night', echoing Jesus' teaching.

Read 1 Corinthians 15. 20-28

Note the sequence:

- the resurrection of Jesus (first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep)
- Jesus as the 'second Adam' (new creation)
- Christ's coming (*parousia*, presence)
- the resurrection of the Church – the rest of the harvest
- the end (*telos*) – the fulfilment, consummation
- Christ hands over the kingdom for ever to the Father – having destroyed all sin and evil – Paul alludes to Psalm 110 here
- destruction of the 'last enemy' – death
- God places all things under Christ's feet – he quotes Psalm 8 here
- Christ is subjected to God, so that God is all in all.

Read 1 Corinthians 15.50-57

- *mystery* – God's secret that is being revealed
- verb 'changed' – instantaneous – a moment, the twinkling of an eye
- last trumpet – imagery, theophany, apocalyptic – being awakened cf. reveille
- image of 'putting on' like a new garment – imperishability for perishability, immortality for mortality

- the swallowing up of death – Paul quotes Isaiah 25.8
- the reality of ‘victory’

Judgment in Paul

- Paul, as heir to developing Jewish belief in a final judgment, has a clear understanding of Christ as the ultimate judge of the living and the dead
- this is bound up with God’s righteousness and holiness and his wrath against all sin and evil – God’s law and nature reveals his wrath against all wrong-doing (Rom. 1 & 2)
- 1 Cor. 4.4-5 - the Lord’s coming will bring to light things now hidden in darkness
- 2 Cor. 5.10 – believers also will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (see also the judgment seat of God, Romans 14. 10-12)
- 1 Cor. 3. 10-15 suggests that on the day of Christ everyone’s work is ‘tested by fire’; if anything remains, there will be a reward, but those who are built on Christ will be saved, but not without judgment
- while Paul taught that we are justified by faith, nevertheless, part of Christ’s judgment is about what we have done (or not done), whether good or bad; we will see our lives for what they are without illusion
- but on the basis of Christ’s vicarious and sacrificial death for us, there is ‘now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8.1).
- how these realities fit into Paul’s sequence regarding the Parousia is not clear i.e. we have no ‘systematic theology’ in this respect.

November 22 The Second Coming in the Gospels

For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming (parousia, presence) of the Son of Man. Matthew 24.27 (see Luke 17.24)

Jewish background:

- the two ages; the present age and the age to come (*olam haba*)
- the Day of the Lord
- the coming of Messiah
- the promise of renewal (Isaiah 11, 35).

Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom (rule) of God:

- in Jesus the Kingdom has come
- his life, death and resurrection inaugurate the ‘end times’
- the Holy Spirit reveals now signs of the coming kingdom

- the kingdom will come in power cf. the Lord's Prayer – 'thy kingdom come/thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

A case study - Mark 13 often called Mark's apocalyptic discourse

Jesus' teaching in Mark 13 arises out of what is called the apocalyptic tradition (see last week's notes): imagery and symbolism and codes, often epic in scale and to do with a cosmic battle between good and evil. Hence, there is a strong theme of *crisis* in apocalyptic.

Mark 13 shows that Jesus was very familiar with apocalyptic writings and he uses them here; no coincidence that, for example, in Mark 13, there are a number of quotations from the Book of Daniel, which draws on early apocalyptic language.

Mark 13: a double reference?

- it refers to what has already happened in history
- it points forward to the end of history
- note the prophetic tradition in the OT often has both a present and future application; OT: many passages relate to events in OT times - original historical fulfilment; but the Church also reads them as pointing forward to Christ - finding their ultimate fulfilment in him.

Read Mark 13. 1-23

On one level Mark 13 is about the past:

- it was about Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that took place in 70 AD
- many scholars date Mark's gospel about AD 60-65, so Jesus' words are referring to events that had not yet happened
- 13: 1-23 can be interpreted as referring to the period leading up to and including the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70
- the fact that Jesus' words did come true vindicate him as the true word of God (Tom Wright)
- basis of Christianity: not a city (Jerusalem) for a nation (Israel) or a building (the Temple) but Jesus
- he is the true Messiah, he is the one whose words have authority; he is the one whom history vindicated.

Read Mark 13. 24-37

In one sense, this passage can still be related to what happened in the first century.

vv. 24, 25: use apocalyptic language to say to us that the events of AD 70 were **earth-shattering** in their significance: destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple: part of God's plan for the salvation not just of the Jews but the world.

v. 26: on this reading, this verse means that the events of AD 70 reveal that Jesus is the eternal Son of God and the truth of God. In apocalyptic, *clouds* refer to God's glory. Jesus is revealed in the events of history as the true Son of Man, the true prophet, the true word of God. And the reference to the *angels* is again apocalyptic language to assure God's people that they will be preserved through this crisis.

vv. 28-31: the fig tree: a little parable saying - I have warned you; just as you can look at a fig tree and know that summer is near, so when my words begin to come true, you will know that these events are near.

v. 30: 'this generation': i.e. before people have died. Jesus spoke these words about AD 30 - so within the life-time of some of you (40 years on) these things will happen. And happen they did.

v. 31: whose words do we trust? Jesus' words will never pass away.

vv. 32-37: Jesus warns - these events will happen, within this generation, but I can't give you the date. Therefore, the people of Jesus have to be alert and watchful - interpreting the signs of the times. To be asleep when disaster strikes will be dire. dire.

But we can also see *a double-application* that seems to point forward to the End:

- cosmic dislocation v. 24, 25
- the gathering in of the elect by the angels v. 27
- 'heaven and earth will pass away' v. 31
- then the parable of the man on the journey returning vv. 34, 35.

Just as AD 70 began the process of the last times, so that process will be completed. And at the end will stand Christ as the coming Son of Man.

v. 26 The title 'Son of Man' draws on Daniel 7:

- Daniel sees a vision of one 'like a Son of Man', surrounded by clouds (apocalyptic - a symbol of glory and divinity) - presented to one whom Daniel calls the 'Ancient of Days' = God. And to whom is given authority, honour, power, whom all people will serve; whose kingdom will last for ever.

We can see this as the final 'revealing' of Christ in glory, vindicated as Son of Man/Son of God for all to see.

Taken as a whole, Mark 13 sets out a number of themes:

- a. The theme of *signs* preceding the Parousia – on earth, wars, earthquakes, famines, persecutions; in heaven – sun, moon, stars, shaking of heavenly powers.

To what extent is this language literal or metaphorical?

Linked to the mission of the Church (Mark 13.10) and to the persecution that Christians will face (Mark 13.9-13).

So, it is about the 'big picture' rather than a prediction of actual 'events'?

- b. There is a sense of imminent expectancy.

Note many NT books seem to assume that the earliest Christian communities believed that the Parousia would happen quickly.

Theme of the day coming *suddenly* (Mark 13.35).

The Church must be ready and expectant – 'be on your guard' (v. 35), 'watch' (v. 36).

Living our lives in trust: that he who has proved so faithful will be faithful.

And having a conviction that history is moving towards his coming day; that our lives and prayers and service actually contribute to his coming.

A discipleship that sees possibilities - never retreats into weariness.

'This generation' (Mark 13.30): if this refers to AD 70, it is straight-forward. It could mean 'the age of the Church' or 'the generation that is alive when Jesus returns' in the sense of 'this particular generation' cf. St Paul last week – 'those of us who are alive when the Lord comes' (1 Thess. 4. 13-18).

See also 9.1 '...there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power'; note this is followed by the account of the Transfiguration (Mark 9. 2-8), itself a prevenient revelation of the Resurrection. Mark 13 stands before the Passion Narrative (Mark 14-16); it looks to the salvation wrought on Calvary and on Easter Day – Christ raised in power. The End is the revealing of what is already accomplished; this was experienced historically by this generation i.e. the first generation of eye-witnesses and we have received and believed their testimony.

- c. the time of the *parousia* is unknown (Mark 13.32) – even the Son does not know! cp. Acts 1.7. Note, some NT passages begin to recognise that the Parousia may be delayed - see the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (Matt 25. 1-13) and the talents (Matt. 25. 14-30), cf. James 5. 7-8; 2 Peter 3. 8-12.

Note also, the theme of Christ as Judge – see the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt. 25.31-46). See also Matthew 24. 36-38, Luke 17.26-37 - the sense of a separation in humanity – 'one taken and one left' i.e. taken in judgment (there is no sense of a 'rapture' here – see last week's notes). Theme of 'standing before the Son of Man'.

Conclusion:

'In the beginning, God...' (Genesis 1.1); in the end, God....

Christ as Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Revelation 22.12)

Our grasp of eschatology is based on a cast-iron conviction that Jesus is true to his word: both for the past and for the future.

This encourages us in our discipleship to be active in his service, joyful in his praise, and looking for the Day of his Parousia.

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