

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	16 November 2025
Service:	Eucharist, 2 before Advent
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

Apocalyptic is a word we often use to mean a catastrophe or disaster. Only yesterday I saw a film on YouTube entitled 'Jobpocalypse'. But in the New Testament it is slightly different. The Greek word from which we get 'apocalypse' means a revelation or disclosure. Accordingly, apocalyptic literature is a type of writing in which God's plans for the future are disclosed or revealed. Often this does involve the use of quite dramatic or heightened language which tells of God disclosing himself within extraordinary, unusual events. The most famous example of apocalyptic literature in the New Testament is the book of Revelation but there are a number of others as well, including today's gospel reading from St Luke's gospel in which we hear of destruction, war, earthquake and signs from the heaven.

But although this passage is written in this heightened literary style, it is also very rooted in the actual historical events that we can trace back to the first century context of Jesus and his disciples in which St Luke's gospel was written.

For example, we hear Jesus predict the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, 'the days will come,' Jesus says, 'when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

The temple, which was the epicentre of Jewish faith and life, was first built under the great King Solomon in the ninth century BC. During its history it was attacked and besieged on numerous occasions, and completely destroyed by the Babylonians during the exile in 586BC. It was rebuilt some 70 years later by the Jewish people returning from exile, and enlarged under King Herod in the New Testament period. But here Jesus predicts that the temple is going to be completely thrown down.

For the first readers or hearers of St Luke's gospel around the year 100AD, these words about the temple in Jerusalem would have had great resonance.

For those who heard Jesus' prediction that the temple was going to be thrown down would have known that this is exactly what did happen. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem in the year 70AD, they did indeed destroy the temple. To this day, it has never been rebuilt, although if you go to Jerusalem, you can visit the western wall, which still remains as a site of prayer and devotion, often referred to as 'the wailing wall'.

The second historical prediction that Jesus makes is to do with the persecution of Christians. His followers will not have an easy life. 'They will,' he says, 'arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name'. In the New Testament, the sequel to St Luke's gospel is the book of the Acts of the Apostles. And it is here that, once again, Jesus' predictions start to become reality. We hear of the life of the earliest Christian communities and some of their key figures such as Stephen, Peter and pre-eminently St Paul. As they spread the gospel of Jesus Christ around the Roman world, their experience is often of struggles, beatings, imprisonment and often martyrdom. Jesus makes it plain that to be a Christian is not necessarily to take the popular option: 'you will be hated by all because of my name'.

Related to these two specific predictions, Jesus issues in this passage a couple of warnings about how they will survive in this environment.

First, he warns them not to try and predict when the end times will actually come. As various disasters happen, many will take them to be a sign that the world is ending. Likewise, many will set themselves up as messiah-style figures who can be the answer to everyone's problems in uncertain times. He instructs them to resist all this and, as elsewhere in the gospels, tells them not to speculate; that different events occurring in world history do not necessarily mean that the end is near.

They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And Jesus said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them.

Secondly, he warns them against fear. Yes, the disciples will be forced to testify before kings and governors. It will be tough, but God will give them what they need. They will find that when faced with trials and inquisitions, that they have been given the wisdom and the words they need. No need even to prepare a defence in advance. Likewise, when faced with persecution, they will find within themselves a strength to endure they never knew they had: 'You will be

hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls’.

So, finally, as twenty-first century Christians what are we to make of this passage, composed in what seems to be a somewhat alien literary style of apocalyptic, and referring to events such as the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and persecution of the early Christians that seem so far in the past. Strangely, its two major lessons seem all too immediate.

At a time when many modern political voices – both on the left and on the right – seem all too keen to predict that various types of disaster presage the end of the world as we know it, we hear Jesus’ warning to be very cautious about predictions of the end times. And indeed about the messianic pretensions of those who think they themselves are ideally suited to lead us through such times. For, sadly, there has rarely been a period of human history when there have not been wars, insurrections, plagues and famines. Important in themselves for us to address, they are not necessarily the sign that the end is imminent, although there are always some people who will seek to dramatize the particular age they live in, and say they are uniquely placed to lead us through it. Jesus simply warns, ‘Do not go after them’.

Secondly, at a time of enormous anxiety on so many levels: mental health crises, concerns about war, economic collapse, cyber-attack, environmental degradation and all the rest of it, we get a simple message. Not that we should be careless of these undoubtedly serious concerns, but we do hear the same message that the angels gave to Mary at the annunciation; that they gave to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth and that Jesus himself gives elsewhere to the disciples: ‘do not be terrified’. We too live by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the light of the resurrection and in the knowledge that God holds the future. We also will be given the strength we need as and when we need it, and are addressed in the same terms: ‘Do not be terrified’.