

THE SIGNS OF JESUS' COMING

The Gospel for today gives us the first part of Jesus' prediction of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and of the end of the world. The chief message is to be watchful. Because we do not know when our Lord will return we must avoid two pitfalls, becoming casual, and becoming impatient. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, although He seems to delay.

Matthew 24 should be taken together with chapter 25. The parables of the five foolish virgins, the talents, and the description of the last judgment reinforce the reminders to be faithful, be wise, and continue to pray.

Perhaps some of the signs will have more detailed fulfilment, but we could hardly say that some of them have not yet been fulfilled. All these signs have been evident in the world and the church ever since Jesus spoke this discourse. From our point of view, the end could have come at any time during the course of history. Even Paul expected the end in his lifetime (Rm 13:11; 1 Th 4:15). Christians regard the whole period after Jesus' ascension as the last time. Because no one knows when He will return, as soon as someone tries to predict a time, we know that he is wrong (Mt 24:36). Jesus showed no interest at all in dating the end exactly or in calculations that would lead to fixing it. The fact that some parts speak about the end as close, and others as "not yet" and unknown has meant that Christians of all generations expect the end soon, and are urged to be ready for it.

Many of the signs are long-range, and many have been fulfilled repeatedly, like earthquakes and wars. Jesus said that such things have to happen, but the end is still to come. Some of them are the beginnings of birth pangs (Mt 24:6-8). The expression "birth pangs" points to the arrival of the new age, to be greeted with joy.

We should not regard fulfilment of particular signs with alarm. God wants us to be certain of our coming redemption through the death and resurrection of his Son, and to await Jesus' coming eagerly (Lk 21:28; Rm 8:23).

In Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 Jesus was answering a double question, one about the destruction of Jerusalem and the other about the end of the world. The Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem about forty years later, in AD 70, after a terrible siege and enormous loss of life.

Daniel's prophecy of the abomination that makes desolate had already been fulfilled when Antiochus Epiphanes set up an altar to the pagan god Zeus Olympius on the sacred altar in the temple in Jerusalem in 168 BC (Dn 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Perhaps it was a type of the destruction of Jerusalem, which was itself a type of the end of the world (Lk 21:20; Mt 24:15-16). The Christians in Jerusalem read the coming signs (Lk 21:21-22; Mt 24:17-20). They left Jerusalem, and went across the Jordan for safety before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

Jesus was the originator of what His apostles taught to the early church. They repeated and unfolded, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what Jesus had already taught them.

In the synoptic Gospels there is little chronological movement from stage to stage. The book of Revelation also records the whole from various points of view, each leading to the end, as seven seals are broken, seven trumpets sound, and seven bowls of wrath are poured out.

The signs that Jesus predicted fall into several categories, signs in the church, in nature, and in human affairs. In the church there will be moves in contrary directions. The Gospel will spread across the world, and it will bind Satan for the greater period of the New Testament (Mt 24:14; Rv 20:1-2). However, false teachers will come (Mt 24:11, 23-26), and there will be a great falling away from the faith (Mt 24:10,12). St Paul wrote that Antichrist would be revealed in a very prominent place in Christendom. He would not appear only just before the end. The tendencies were already at work when Paul wrote, but he was being held back. Antichrist would continue until Christ's return (2 Th 2:3-12; 1 Jn 4:3). Christians can expect persecution from those outside the church (Mt 24:9; Lk 21:12-15, 17; 2 Pt 3:4). There will also be persecution from those who have the name of Christians (Mt 24:10; Lk 21:16).

In a short period before the end Satan will be loosed. That means that the power of the Gospel to restrain him will no longer be as effective (Rv 20:3). Revelation speaks of a silencing of the testimony of Law and Gospel (11:1-10). People who hope for a millennium, a wonderful period of peace for a thousand years, will be proved wrong. Things will get worse, not better.

A good deal of apocalyptic literature, mostly Jewish in origin, was written between 165 BC and AD 100. Some of it coincided with the time of Jesus and His apostles. It reflected a period of persecution and national helplessness, when first Syria and then Rome dominated Palestine. We do not know the names of the authors, and they use hidden and symbolic language. The last half of the book of Daniel had already used such symbolic language, with its references to the kings of the north and the south (Syria and Egypt) and various periods of

days in symbolic numbers. People who read the Book of Revelation should be clear about what kind of literature it is. Jesus and John used language that was already familiar to their hearers.

There is clear agreement between the Gospels and Revelation. The period of the spread of the Gospel during the main time of the New Testament is presented in Revelation in two ways, as the symbolic number ten cubed, or as half of God's number, seven. Presumably the first three and a half years was the time of the Old Testament. The main period of the New Testament is expressed symbolically as three and a half years or forty-two months, or 1,260 days (Rv 11:2-3; Dn 9:27; Rv 12:6,14; Dn 7:25; Dn 12:7).

The time of great trouble just before the end is also expressed symbolically in Revelation as three and a half days or a "short season." (Rv 11:9,11; 20:3). There was great distress immediately before Jerusalem was destroyed, and perhaps this was a type of great distress before the end. Jesus said that if it had not been cut short, no one would survive, but it will be shortened for the sake of the elect (Dn 12:1; Mt 24:21-22).

Jesus predicted signs in nature and in world history. They included wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes, and other fearful events (Mt 24:6-8; Lk 21:11).

A special warning for Christians was the prediction of increasing materialism, violence, and wickedness. Jesus compared the time to the period just before God destroyed the world by water in the flood (Mt 24:37-39, Lk 17:28-29).

St Peter even included wide acceptance of a principle of uniformity, which is fundamental to the theory of evolution (2 Pt 3:3-4).

Prophecy is clearer after it has been fulfilled. We cannot be sure whether the time of terror, which includes the darkening of the sun, stars falling, and the sea tossing, (Mt 24:29-31, Mk 13:24-26; Lk 21:25-27; Rv 6:12-17; Joel 2:30-31) means events before the end, or the actual end of the world itself.

Believers should be serene as they contemplate the signs of the end of the world. Jesus has promised that no harm whatever will come to His elect. Christians should be sure that they will suffer no harm. (Lk 21:18; Rv 7:2).

This present world will be destroyed by fire, as it was once destroyed by water (2 Pt 3:7,10). Our Lord will return suddenly and visibly, raise the bodies of all the dead, and judge all people in righteousness (Mt 24:27, 30-31). God will create a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pt 3:13). The ungodly will go away to everlasting punishment, but the believers to everlasting life (Mt 25:46).