

Mark 13:1-37

So what are the signs saying?

We do read the signs don't we? We see the haze of green appearing on the hedges and feel occasionally the sun warm enough that you can take your scarf off and you know that summer is on the way and it's time to put the top down on the car!

Some signs are more obvious and you read that the motorway is ending and you think good I'll be able to get along faster now.

We read the sign and understand what lies ahead. So as I look at my paper and see the Conference League tables I read the signs very well, I know Kettering are going down!

But of course we can never be sure of what is going to happen in the future and often speculation about the future is just that and is unsettling.

I can remember once seeing a picture frame with an illustrative saying in it which ran something like this, "Today is the tomorrow you were worrying about yesterday and it isn't too bad is it?"

We can't always know what lies ahead and in trying we can create uncertainty for ourselves and waste time and effort in speculation. Better I think to recognise what the Psalmist knew that "My times are in his hands" (Ps 31:15) and find our security not in understanding or second guessing the future but in trusting God for today and tomorrow.

That is what this long passage we have today is all about and we continue our series, Jesus Master of the world and today think about Jesus interpreter of the ages.

Have a look with me at Mark 13 and do keep your eyes on the text as I don't have time to read all the verses again as we go through.

We are now in the last week of Jesus' life. He and his disciples have been in the temple where Jesus has been teaching and answering questions. As they left one of the disciples remarked on the size of the temple and its stones. The temple was the point of security for God's people, a sign that God was with them. So Jesus' response must have been upsetting as he warns that a day will come when the temple would be destroyed.

Later sitting on the Mount of Olives looking back across the valley to the temple the disciples questioned him about this. When will it happen and what would be the signs it was about to happen because such an event would surely mean the end of the world.

In his answer to them Jesus reveals himself as Sovereign who is interpreter of the ages able to know what is to come and understand what is to come. He is able to interpret the signs and to teach his disciples. His message in a nutshell is that yes the end would come but there would be no signs of warning. Instead what they would see and experience should encourage them to vigilance as disciples not to calculating some end point.

1. Prophets and disasters v5-8

Jesus began with two things commonly associated with the end of the world, prophets who claim to be the Messiah and wars and earthquakes and the like. People now and then tend to see these as sign of the end but Jesus says v 8 that “these are the beginning of the birth pangs”. They remind that the end will come but not that it is just about to happen. The message of Jesus to his followers was don’t be deceived.

2. Persecution and pain v9-13

Jesus warned them that as his followers they would be arrested and put on trial and you can almost see the disciples saying yes, yes this must be the sign even if the wars and so on weren’t, but no. All he said to them was to be on their guard, be ready for it and stand firm. In our world today we unfortunately see this happening in many places around the world. Open Doors which is one of our Mission Partners has a lot of information of places and people under persecution. But even then this is not a sign that the end of the world and the return of Jesus is imminent.

3. desolation and flight v14-23 & 28-31

Next Jesus warned of a specific event which would happen in their lifetime. What he was referring to as, ‘the abomination’ was that there would be an act of sacrilege in the Temple. However, the disciples may well have thought that had already happened back in 168 BC - though of course they didn't think of it as BC - when Antiochus Epiphanes had put an altar to Zeus in the temple. That was over surely. Yet they would experience war within forty years and many of the disciples would be put to death for their faith. The temple would be more than desecrated it would be destroyed in AD70. The unthinkable would happen, the Temple would be destroyed and yet even that would not be the end. Instead Jesus encouraged people to run away – not much good if it was the end of the world. He knew the fall of the Temple and the persecution that would go with it was not the end but was certainly a good reason to flee Jerusalem. No even this, bad as it would be, is not the sign of the end rather, as we see in v28, like the appearing of buds on the fig tree a sign of the closeness of summer but not the fact that it will happen tomorrow.

4. Return and readiness V24-26 & 32-37

However Jesus knew that one day he would return and that would bring about the end of time as we know it. There is debate as to whether vs 24-27 do refer to Jesus final return but I feel they do with the resulting gathering together of God’s people who have been scattered over the world. Those of who did Bible overview will remember that in the Bible scattering of the people, as at the tower of Babel and the exile first into Assyria and then to Babylon, was a sign of God’s curse on his people whereas gathering of his people was a sign of his blessing. But again you can imagine the disciples on the edge of their seats saying yes fine so give us a date let’s get it in the diary so we are ready for it.

But Jesus' answer in v32 is no one knows the hour so rather than sit waiting for that day they are to be alert that is they are to be vigilant not calculating. Yes the day will come but only when the Father says so and as Jesus pointed out even he didn't know when that would be so it is futile for us to speculate.

However Jesus did understand the times in which he and his followers were living and he understands our times and more than that he is sovereign over every age and can give a true understanding of the days in which we live. "Sir we would see Jesus", and here we see Jesus as interpreter of the ages.

However as he does that we benefit and learn from that interpretation and the big thing we need to learn as we listen to and follow Jesus is that he calls us to vigilance not calculation. Let me spell it out in four things that I think these verses said to Peter James John and Andrew sitting there on the Mount of Olives and say to us sitting here in Christ Church or those sitting at home or wherever listening to the download.

1. Be aware V5

V5 – watch out that no one deceives you. Friends this whole idea of the return of Jesus and the end of the world is a fruitful field of fruitless speculation. If the Jehovah's witnesses come to your door they will engage you in conversation about events in the world and see these as signs of the end of the world. They have either explicitly stated or strongly implied this event and linked it to dates in 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975 and 1994. Then just last year Harold Camping in the USA invested millions in a campaign that pronounced the definitive end on May 21. When that didn't happen, he revised the date to Oct 21. Friends don't be deceived into thinking we can know or into wasting time in trying to read signs. Yes there will be wars and rumours of wars as there have been over centuries but these simply act to remind you we live in the last days and that Jesus may well return at any moment. We are to be aware or be alert because that day could happen but we are not to be deceived by those who claim to know when.

2. be on your guard, v9.

The one who interprets the ages warned his followers to be on their guard because there would be stormy times ahead. Do you ever listen to the shipping forecast on Radio 4? I think now the only times I listen is when I am listening to the cricket and it interrupts. However years back when I worked the summer with friends in Devon I would listen to the forecast just before 6pm so that we knew what the weather would be the next day and so what we needed to do with the boats. Jesus here was saying to his disciples that the way ahead would not be easy. They would be arrested, they would be betrayed even by family and they needed to be on guard to be prepared and v13 to stand firm. We too need to be on guard because we too are in a battle. We are in a battle for our faith and

for the right to express our faith even in this country and much more so in many other countries. Understand the times and be on guard ready to stand for Jesus and the Christian faith.

3. be busy v34

You see I blame Rob Pullen. He says to me that he will pick me up and take me to cricket on a Thursday at say 6.30pm. So I, being a very punctual person, am ready and waiting at 6.20. I'm not doing anything constructive just ready and waiting but actually I'm doing nothing. I'm just waiting and I blame him. It is not my fault.

There have been and still are people who feel that well because Jesus will return at any time it is not worth doing anything in terms of service or ministry or evangelism.

But actually what Jesus says here counters that and says that while we wait we are to be busy about his service.

Jesus analogy in vs 32-37 is of a man going away and leaving his servants to look after the house but not telling them when he would return. Each has their assigned task and the expectation was that each would be doing that task even to the point when the master returned. He didn't expect them to be wasting time just waiting. It's there in v34 "each with his assigned task". We are to be busy, to be about the Lord's business as we wait for his return rather than simply waiting and doing nothing. One often asked question is why is it in the church that a small group of people seem to do a large proportion of the work? It is a good question especially in the light of what Jesus says here about "each with his assigned task". So are we about the Lord's work as we wait for the day when he will return?

4. be assured

I do think that the whole passage and Jesus response to the question in v4 is about assuring the disciples. You see for them as good Jews so much of their security would have been focussed in the temple. It was the sign of God's presence amongst his people.

However it was a false sign and during their lifetime would be removed. But what Jesus was saying here and what Mark is showing us through the whole of this book is that Jesus is God's Messiah and we should look to him for our security. In John's gospel we read how in John 2:19 Jesus refers to himself as the temple. Yes the building which was a sign of God's presence would be removed but that was because it had fulfilled its role. The days of animal sacrifice were over but more now in Jesus God lived among his people in a new way. He is the temple and his disciples meet God in and through Jesus. He is our security and our hope because one day he will return as King. Yes for them as for us it is not always easy or comfortable following Jesus as we wait for that day but we are secure in him both now and eternally and as we wait be are to be aware, on our guard and busy in his service.