

Followers of the Way
Sermon: 20 February 2022
Preacher: Steve Campbell
Faithful Till He Comes

Matt 24: 36 - 51

We are living in the Last Days.

But when did the Last Days begin? Some believe they only began when the state of Israel was declared in 1948; others at various points throughout history.

The truth is they began 2,000 years ago with the coming of Jesus. Hebrews 1:1&2 *'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.'*

We may now be living in the last of the Last Days, but we do not know how long that will be. Jesus emphatically stated that no-one, not even He Himself, knows! **v.36 READ**

However, that has not stopped many people across the centuries trying to guess the date of Christ's Second Coming. It happened as far back as the middle of the second century when Maximilian, a leader of the Montanists, claimed Christ would come at the end of his life. Other dates have been proffered: 1,000AD, 1500, and of course in our own generation the year 2,000, Y2K with all the doomsday threats of the Millennium Bug, computers crashing and planes falling out of the sky.

Many throughout history have claimed to have special prophetic insight as to when Christ will return to earth. Hal Lindsey wrote the bestselling and highly influential book 'The Late Great Planet Earth' in 1971, predicting Jesus would return to earth in one biblical generation, 40 years, after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. 1988 has come and gone and Christ yet tarries!

I remember hearing a famous preacher talking about the Second Coming, and using very questionable exegesis proclaimed that Jesus would return around the year 2,000

At best these are speculations, at worst false prophecy!

Our passage from Matthew 24 is what's known as apocalyptic. This along with parallel passages in Mark and Luke, as well as parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, some minor prophets and the whole of Revelation, form the apocalyptic literature of the Bible.

It's ironic that apocalypse mean a disclosure of knowledge or lifting of a veil, whereas most people reading it find it quite obscure and the meaning veiled.

Jesus had just left the temple when his disciples drew his attention to the magnificent buildings, which being from Galilee, they wouldn't have been used to. The Lord from the Mount of Olives then prophesies Jerusalem's fall and the destruction of the temple. The Olivet Discourse.

In answering the disciples' question, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus continues to speak prophetically. He warns them about false Messiahs coming, as they did – such as Simon Bar Cochba who led a revolt against the Romans in 132AD and was hailed as Messiah, yet ultimately defeated. But Jesus cautioned, 'Watch out that no-one deceives you.' v.4

In common with the prophets of old, Jesus' description of what will happen is compressed, like looking at a scene through a powerful telescope, where objects that are at a great distance from each other seem very close together.

Jesus describes the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the age as if they were going to happen together, even though these events are centuries apart. His purpose in doing this is not to encourage speculation about timings, remember no-one knows about that day or hour; rather it's to motivate us into a sense of expectant readiness.

We are to daily live in the expectancy that Christ will return, even though we don't know when, and be in a state of preparedness for when it will happen. He will appear suddenly and, for most, unexpectedly as in the days of Noah when the flood came upon the people. 'Therefore keep watch,' he said, 'because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.' (v.42)

Jesus then tells several parables to underline his point, culminating with the story of the sheep and the goats at the final judgement. The underlying theme is faithfulness – the wise virgins were faithful to bring extra oil to keep their lamps burning; the faithful servants were commended for using the talents they were given rather than burying them in the ground; and the wise servant is rewarded for faithfully feeding his fellow servants during his master's absence.

Faith and faithfulness are closely linked: our faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation is evidenced by our faithfulness to Him as we live in obedience to His word. This is clearly seen in the parable of the faithful and wicked servants **vv.45-51 READ**

The faithful servant is also wise and takes on the responsibility the master has entrusted to him seriously. He is still a servant yet he cares for and feeds his fellow servants at the proper time, even though his master's eye is not upon him – like Joseph in the Old Testament. He will gain his reward at the master's return.

The wicked servant is not only unfaithful, but downright evil allowing his sinful nature free reign, beating his fellow servants, getting drunk and showing contempt for his master, because he thinks he'll never know. But he will be punished severely for his unfaithful wickedness.

These parables apply to all believers, all disciples of Christ, because we are all called to be faithful as we await the return of Jesus. However, there is a sense that Jesus has in mind Church Leaders as the servant is given special responsibility for feeding his fellow servants. In the Old Testament leaders of God's people were designated shepherds who were charged with caring for and feeding the flock. Some were faithful, many others not so and received a fierce rebuke from the LORD - E.g. Jeremiah 10:21

*The shepherds are senseless and do not enquire of the LORD;
so they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered.*

And Ezekiel's prophecy has echoes of the wicked servant in the parable - Ezekiel 34:1-3

The word of the LORD came to me:

'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them:

"This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

woe to you shepherds of Israel

who only take care of yourselves!

Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.

Jesus in John 10 denounces the unfaithful shepherds and proclaims himself as the Good Shepherd. All who come after him are to be under-shepherds, pastors, modelling themselves on Jesus who gave up his life for the sheep.

As we look at the history of the Church we see many fine examples of those who fulfilled their calling as faithful servants and shepherds, for example Polycarp who served his Lord and Master, becoming bishop of Smyrna before being martyred at the age of 86.

Unfortunately, there are far too many examples of wicked, unfaithful servants who abused their position and treated their Lord and His followers with contempt. The most infamous would be the Borgias, who produced two popes, but were accused of many crimes including incest, theft, adultery, simony, bribery, and murder!

No wonder Jesus had some strong words of judgement against those wicked, unfaithful servants. But it's not only historically we see this happening, not everyone called to pastoral ministry today is fulfilling their duty faithfully.

One leading clergyman in England, who advocates the Church's acceptance and celebration of same-sex relationships, said recently - 'Climate change is the gospel.'¹ No, this is not the gospel!

1. [Archbishop of York says Climate Change IS the Gospel | VirtueOnline – The Voice for Global Orthodox Anglicanism](#)

The gospel is the good news of Christ's death and resurrection to free us from bondage to Satan, and restore us to life. The gospel is that obedience to God's word that leads to life. The Apostle Paul was absolutely clear. He said, if anyone preaches anything other than this, he is eternally condemned (Gal 1:8-9) just like the wicked servant in Jesus' parable.

However, as I said, it's not only Church leaders who are mentioned in Jesus' parable. Each one of us, whoever we are, whatever we do, are to live faithfully until Christ returns.

What does a faithful life look like? Faithfulness is not only about the big things, in fact it's seldom about the big things! Rather it is the daily, regular discipline of being faithful in the small, unseen, seemingly insignificant things.

Those things for which we receive no recognition or praise simply because they are unseen and go unnoticed. The faithful and wicked servants both knew their master could not see them, but *we* know the Lord sees all our deeds and will reward us accordingly.

Ananias was an ordinary disciple in Damascus, but he was faithful – in worship, prayer, study, fellowship. The Lord chose him to carry a message to Saul of Tarsus, who had been blinded by a vision of the Lord Jesus on the way to Damascus. Ananias was faithful in obedience, fulfilling the Lord's command in carrying the message to this man who had come to destroy him and the Church he belonged to. And he even graciously addressed him as 'Brother Saul'. Because of Ananias' faithfulness Saul became Paul the Apostle and the gospel was spread not only among Jews but throughout the entire Gentile world.

We are living in the Last Days; the last of the Last Days.

But let that not lead to fear or needless speculation, rather let us do as Jesus Himself commanded – live in a state of constant readiness and be faithful until He comes.

Then we will one day hear from His lips those magnificent words –

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt 25:23)