

The destruction of the temple

1 Introduction

This evening we're starting on the fifth block of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel - and the focus changes dramatically.

We have thought about the call of Jesus to his followers to engage in mission - to carry on the work he started; we have explored some parables where Jesus was explaining what the kingdom of heaven is like and how to live as part of it; we have thought about how we relate to each other as followers of Jesus - and particularly when things go wrong.

But here, in this last block, the focus changes from the day-to-day reality and demands of Christian living to looking ahead to what is to come. There's a recognition that things aren't always going to carry on as they are, but that there are going to be decisive moments in history when things change. And those two moments are introduced in the questions that the followers of Jesus ask him in Matt 24:3

But before we look at those questions we need to see what triggered them and we see that as we look at the first couple of verses.

2 The temple will be destroyed (Matt 24:1-2)

Jesus and his followers were walking away from the temple - the centre of Jewish religion and hope - and they draw his attention to the wonder and the grandeur of the buildings. And Jesus' reply is shocking - that everything will be torn down, nothing will be left.

And here Jesus is picking up on a theme that he alluded to earlier at the end of the previous chapter

Matthew 23:38-39 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

And here Jesus is saying that the house, the temple, will be abandoned - but that there is a time when he will return. And behind that, of course, is the reality he has been speaking about that he is going to go away.

And so, unsurprisingly, his disciples take the opportunity that his words have provided to dig a little deeper to get an idea of timescales and pointers to these two events - the destruction of the temple and the return of Jesus.

Of course - for the disciples both of these events are in the future; for us one has already happened (the temple was destroyed in AD70) while the return of Jesus is still ahead of us. And that's something we need to bear in mind as we try and work out what Jesus says in his answers.

3 Two questions (Matt 24:3)

And so they ask their questions - but one of the difficulties we have in trying to understand what Jesus says is they ask two questions:

- when will the temple be destroyed?
- when will you return?

And Jesus doesn't give us a set of notes to make it clear when he stops talking about one of these topics and starts to talk about the other, or whether both themes are mixed in together.

If you imagine being in a three-way phone conversation with you and two other people - they are both asking you questions and you are responding to both of them. But someone who is in the same room as you will only hear what you are saying and it may be difficult to unravel which bits of what you are saying are addressed to one person and which bits to the other. And it would still be difficult even if you knew the basic things each person was asking.

And so it should probably be no surprise to find out that there are many different views on this - which of what Jesus is saying in the rest of the chapter is about the destruction of the temple and which is about his return? Some of it is relatively clear, some is less so, but its important to have an approach to this before we start.

I think that the rest of the passage we read earlier - so up to Matt 24:35 is about the destruction of the temple while the remainder of the chapter is about the return of Jesus with Matt 25 picking up on some of the implications of that for his people. Other views are available - primarily about whether some of the first 35 verses are actually speaking about the return of Jesus and I'm happy to discuss them - but this gives a relatively clear way of looking at

the chapter and it's how we're going to approach it. This evening we'll focus on the first part - the destruction of the temple - and then in the morning in two weeks time we'll look at the rest of the chapter and see what it says about the return of Jesus. And I'm looking forward to having our oldest son, Richard, preaching that morning. (We're taking a break next week to focus on Remembrance Sunday).

4 The destruction of the Temple (Matt 24:4-35)

There are a number of sections in Jesus' answer and it's helpful to understand what they are - and I'm going to summarise them before focusing on one of them

- Preliminary events (vv4-8)
- Persecution leading up to it (vv9-14)
- Beginning of the end (vv15-28)
- Destruction as predicted (vv29-31)
- Summary (vv32-33)
- Timeline (v34)
- Call for confidence (v35)

4.1 Preliminary events (Matt 24:4-8)

Here Jesus speaks about the normal things of history - things that we may not like but things that have been happening throughout all of recorded history. Wars, speculation, natural disasters are all things that have happened, will continue to happen and were not to be seen as an indication that the temple was going to be imminently destroyed. That would be heralded by something much more specific and obvious.

These times of difficulty would be great opportunities for aspiring leaders to stand up and say that they were the ones who had been sent to rescue and deliver God's people out of adversity - and Jesus is warning his followers not to be taken in, not to go after them, but to remain true to him. And many people did rise up during that period - often claiming to be sent by God and acting in his power - and they drew crowds after them. So Jesus' warning was important and necessary.

And it's interesting that many Christians look at what is going on in the world around us - and have been doing so for centuries - and take these warnings of Jesus as applying to when he is going to return and use them to predict that his return is near. Whereas, according to the framework we are using, these were about the specific events that led up to the destruction of the temple and aren't an indication of the end, simply an indication of the beginning.

4.2 Persecution leading up to it (Matt 24:9-14)

Jesus reminds his followers that they will be persecuted, killed and hated because they have committed themselves to following him. This is an intensification of the persecution Jesus spoke about in Matt 10 that we looked at some weeks ago and a call to stand firm until the end. It was a call that was important then - and continues to be important today as we encounter our own persecution and opposition because we are following Jesus.

But in the midst of all this persecution and difficulty Jesus tells them that the "gospel of the kingdom" - the good news about what God is doing through Jesus - is going to be preached across the whole world (Matt 24:14). And we shouldn't take this to mean the entire globe but the "known world" at that time which was seen as the land around the Mediterranean and some to the East - throughout which the gospel was preached before the terrible events of AD70. And this preaching continued after that - a clear statement that what God was doing was no longer centred in the temple but in the person and work of Jesus.

4.3 Beginning of the end (Matt 24:15-28)

And then there's a reference to an abomination standing in the holy place - which is to be seen as an indication that the predicted destruction is very close and the people are encouraged to flee from Jerusalem to escape the carnage that is to follow.

We're not quite sure what this "abomination" was but once the Roman forces started massing around the city the destruction of the temple - and its desecration - was a likely outcome.

During this terrible time there would - again - be an opportunity for people to rise up and claim they could deliver the people. But this is something Jesus cautions against listening to and says that when the Messiah does come

(speaking about his return and contrasting it with the events leading up to the fall of the temple) it will be obvious to everyone.

He is more concerned about the difficulties that people will have in escaping, particularly those whose movement is restricted or if the weather was really bad.

It was - Jesus was saying - going to be a terrible time and this is how it turned out.

4.4 Destruction as predicted (Matt 24:29-31)

The Jews started a revolt against the Romans in AD66. This was partially crushed in AD67-68 but then in AD70 - after a siege of five terrible months - Romans forces swept into the city destroying the temple and most of the buildings.

And the destruction of the city and temple is described in figurative, symbolic, language - with talk of sun and moon no longer giving off light, and stars falling out of the sky. This language was typically used, not to suggest that the sun's light would physically stop shining, but to stress the cosmic importance of what was happening.

This wasn't just going to be the destruction of a building but the end of a way of life and that is what this language is intended to communicate. Think of the impact - symbolically and actually - if Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey were all destroyed. Buildings which are the centre of power, authority, order, religion in our country - this is the sort of thing that was represented by the Temple and gives an indication of the sense of loss and grief that the Jews were going to experience when it was destroyed.

And then verses 30-31 which speak about the Son of Man coming with power and great glory are some of the verses often thought about as referring to the return of Jesus. I don't think that's the case and will come back to them later.

4.5 Summary (Matt 24:32-33)

But just completing the outline of the passage - in verses 32&33 Jesus is basically saying - you know that when you start to see leaves on the trees you know that summer is round the corner. So when you see the signs I have been

talking about you will know that the destruction of the temple is imminent and you need to be prepared.

4.6 Timeline (Matt 24:34)

In verse 34 he doesn't give an exact date for the destruction but makes it clear its going to be in the near future - as people living at the time Jesus was speaking those words, people who heard Jesus speak those words, would be around to see it and be reminded of the words Jesus had spoken.

4.7 Call for confidence (Matt 24:35)

And then Jesus draws this section to a close with some wonderful words of confidence - reminding them that whatever is destroyed around them, whatever comes to an end, what he is saying and the truth of it will continue unchanged. And let's be those who are prepared to trust and rely on the words of Jesus - not just these here but everything he has said and continues to say into our lives.

5 Sign of the Son of Man (Matt 24:30-31)

But its important to come back to the couple of verses I skipped over - as I think they are key to our understanding of what Jesus was saying, what Jesus was trying to get his followers to understand.

Jesus is effectively saying three things:

- The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven
- People will mourn when they see this
- He will send his angels to gather his people

The "Son of Man" was a term often used to refer to a person so in Ezekiel 2:1 (for example) God calls Ezekiel to be a prophet and refers to him as "Son of man". And it is a description that Jesus often used for himself.

But a really significant time it is used in the Old Testament is in Daniel 7:13-14.

Daniel 7:13-14 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all

nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

People often take the words of Jesus in Matt 24:30 about Jesus coming with power and authority as referring to his return to earth in triumph.

But, as we see from Daniel, the idea is of this Son of Man coming to God - in heaven - and being given all authority and power and becoming the object of universal worship. This is not about the return of Jesus but a celebration in heaven of what he has achieved in his death, resurrection and ascension.

One of the reasons the authorities wanted to get rid of Jesus was they saw him as a threat to their position and way of life - a way of life that was caught up in the temple. And one of the accusations used against him at his trial was that he had threatened to destroy the temple.

Here we have two opposing ways of gaining access to God - the temple and Jesus.

- The temple had been a very important place in the life and worship of the Jewish people but those responsible for it, those worshipping in it, had lost their way.
- Jesus came as a new and better way to gain access to the Father, to be able to live in relationship with him

This is the tension to which Jesus is referring and what he is saying is that when the temple is destroyed it will confirm to everyone who will listen that what he had been saying was true and the way to God was now through him. And as those in authority, those who had condemned and killed Jesus, reflected on the destruction of everything that was important to them they would grieve as they started to realise they had been backing the wrong side. It is now Jesus who has the place of authority and power and access - and it is that Jesus who will continue to send out his angels and messengers and draw people to him.

There are things we rely on, systems we trust in, but one of the things that this passage tells us is that they may all be destroyed, they may all disappear. But for those of us who are trusting in Jesus, those of us who are resting in him, we need never be defeated even if everything around us comes under attack because Jesus is in that place of ultimate power and authority and we are safe in him.

And as safe, redeemed people we rejoice in what he has done and we live in anticipation of his return - but that's a subject for another time.