



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



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If you had the chance or the opportunity to ask somebody famous one question, what would it be? Well I suppose it would have to depend on who the person was, wouldn't it? For example if it was Prime Minister Tony Blair, perhaps the question might be, "When are you going to deliver on your health services promises?" If it was someone like Stephen Spielberg the movie director you might want to ask him where he gets his inspiration from. A singer/songwriter in the music world might be asked what is that song all about, what are you trying to say through it? If it was Rafa Beneites I would love to ask him "how does it feel beating Man Utd in the FA cup?" I am sure you perhaps have your own questions for different people and you never know, you may get the opportunity to ask the question one day! But if you could ask Jesus any question today and be given a direct answer then I am certain that today's topic might well feature in the top 3.

"Jesus, when are you coming back again?"

The disciples wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed and about the events leading to 'the end'. And so Jesus takes time to describe to them what to expect. The problem with this chapter is that there are many people who have many ideas about what Jesus was saying here. Very few agree about the events that are detailed and I would hazard a guess that there are some here this morning who will not agree, necessarily with all that I have to say! For that reason I really want to handle the first 31 verses of chapter 13 very gently and concentrate more on the final 5 verses.

The bulk of the chapter is fascinating and largely deals with the double invasion of Jerusalem by first the Assyrians, then second by the Romans when they eventually flattened the temple in AD 70. In chapter 13 verses 5 to 23 signs of the end are mentioned, sometimes in the form of warnings. Let me run briefly through these before getting to the hub of our thoughts today. We read that:

- There will be Christian leaders trying to mislead Christians. They will draw attention to themselves with miracles and wonders which are no guide to truth or God's approval of them.
- There will be world conflict and natural disaster.
- But we are not to be alarmed for they are like the labour pains that herald the joy of new birth.
- For the followers of Jesus there will be suffering and persecution from the state, official religion and one's own family.
- The good news preached to all the nations will be a sign of the end, even though the world will not necessarily be come more Christian.

- There will be the 'awful horror' or 'the abomination that causes desolation' mentioned in the book of Daniel.

This referred to the pagan altar placed in the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC. In Mark it probably means that another foreign power is expected to desecrate the temple. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple eventually took place when the Romans burnt and dismantled the city in AD70. Severe as the end times may be, God has actually curtailed the suffering out of love for his people so that they will not be destroyed.

Chapter 13 verses 24 to 27 is the second part of the answer to the disciples' question. After the signs and warnings, as part of the end itself, the entire universe will collapse. But this is only the framework for the one event which is important — the coming of the Son of Man. The section chapter 13 verses 28 to 37 has three lessons about the timing of the end.

- The time of the end is near!

The problem here is that not only this chapter but the New Testament as a whole stresses the nearness of the end. How can we explain this? Could it be that Jesus was wrong? In the Western world we tend to think that the end of the present age is at some unknown point along a straight line of history in front of us towards which we travel. It makes more sense for us to think that we are travelling parallel to the end always near to it — like along a footpath on the a road — so that at any God may come and sweep us up into his future.

- Only the Father know when the end will come.

I can remember growing up in Dungannon at that magical time of year. It was around about Christmas time and my parents had told me that my grandparents were coming up to stay with us over Christmas. Where we lived you could see folk arriving as they came along the main road before they would turn into our house. I can vividly remember kneeling on the sofa in our lounge facing out the window just waiting to get a glimpse of my grandpa's light blue mark one Ford Escort. I was just so excited about seeing them, that I must have sat there for hours just watching and waiting. My love for them and my desire to see them and be with them had me transfixed. Surely the same should be true of Jesus. We eagerly wait for His return and watch for Him to come but at times it seems like He is never going to get here. Jesus has always been true to His word and He is on His way.

Mark 13:32-37:

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back - whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' "

The promise that Jesus will one day return is one of the greatest sources of hope for us as Christians but it is also sometimes a bit frustrating as well. It is frustrating in the fact that we are still waiting and we are still watching for Him to come. Let me give you a few suggestions about what you should do as you wait for Jesus.

Be faithful:

The surest way to become hopeless is to simply open your eyes in the morning and look around you. Everything seems to be falling apart. Huge deficits, world terrorism, train, car and airplane accidents, natural disasters and on and on. With so much going wrong there is little room to see what is going right. We shake our heads and wonder, “When will this all change? Can we continue to live in a world that is so corrupt, so full of failure and disaster?” Even a Christian heart needs strengthening in a time like this. Nevertheless, things have been worse.

There was a time many centuries ago when plagues struck Europe and nearly a third of the population was decimated. There have been times when wars were more frequent and more bloody. There have been times when terror stalked this planet in the form of Attila, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Hitler and a long list of others. So, are we to take comfort from the fact that it could be worse? Not really. There is little comfort in misery, pain and suffering despite the fact that we now have modern medicine. There is certainly no comfort in war and bloodshed no matter how distant it may be from our shores. Bad is bad, evil is evil regardless of the time in history.

I was always struck, however, by the fact that, despite evil and suffering in this world, there have always been a handful of individuals who excel in goodness, wisdom and mercy despite their surroundings. Regardless of what you thought of who she was, I wonder, how did Mother Teresa, confronted with overwhelming suffering, poverty and violence, excel in a culture that was totally foreign to the message of sin and grace, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? Or, for that matter, go back in history. What gave John Wycliffe the ability and the zeal to pursue the translation of the Bible in an English culture so dominated by graft, cunning, and despotic power?

Go through history and you will see examples of men and women who have overcome the obstacles of evil and even prospered in the midst of decadence, evil and sorrow. The Apostles who faced off with the mightiest empire this world has ever known, were able to plant the seeds of grace and mercy amidst an empire that hated everything that had to do with this Christ! The list goes on and on. Even down to this day, the world is mystified that there are those who are willing to face off with evil even when their own lives are at stake. There is a common denominator amongst all these men and women. That denominator is Christ. It is the Christian who has consistently shown forth when all others have faded into the blackness of evil. It is the man or woman convinced of the hope of Christ, that has taken the risk, assumed the extra hardship, even sacrificed a life so that amidst all the suffering and evil, there would always be a light piercing the darkness. What gives some Christians this unique ability? Perhaps they have something going for them that no one else has?

C.S. Lewis writes,,: “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next . . . all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’; aim at earth and you will get neither.”
(C.S.Lewis, Mere Christianity, Christian Behavior)

Jesus said that even He does not know the day or the hour and if he doesn't know it neither do any of the prophecy teachers on TV. Faith is the essence of what we hope for and the evidence of what we cannot see. Keep living out the faith that you accepted when

you came to know Christ. Remember that Jesus has never broken a promise yet and He never will. If He said He would return then the day is coming when He will arrive.

Be diligent:

The boss caught Jim sitting at his desk staring out the window. "Why aren't you working Jim?" Without much thought Jim confessed to his boss, "Because I didn't see you coming." We are to work while we wait. A gardener for a large estate in northern Italy was conducting a visitor through the castle and the beautiful, well-groomed grounds. As the visitor had lunch with the gardener and his wife, he commended them for the beautiful way they were keeping the gardens. He asked, "By the way, when was the last time the owner was here? He said, "I was about ten years ago." The visitor asked, "Then why do you keep the gardens in such an immaculate, lovely manner?" He said, "Because I'm expecting him to return." He persisted, "Is he coming next week?" The gardener replied, "I don't know when he is coming, but I am expecting him today."

Although he didn't come that day, he was living in the light of the owner's imminent return. The gardener wasn't hanging over the gate, watching down the road to see whether his master was coming. He was in the garden, trimming, cutting, mowing, weeding, planting. He was busy. That is what Paul is talking about when he says we should be established in the work of the Lord in the view of the fact that He is returning. We need to wake up, watch, work and witness for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is coming again! Jesus will come unexpectedly, so be ready at any time to take the call of the Saviour and go home with Him.

Live each and every day like it is the day that Jesus will come back because it just might be today.

Be watchful:

During one of his expeditions to the Antarctic, Sir Ernest Shackleton left some of his men on Elephant Island with the intent of returning for them and carrying them back to England. But he was delayed. By the time he could go back for them the sea had frozen and he had no access to the island. Three times he tried to reach them but was prevented by the ice. Finally, on his fourth try, he broke through and found a narrow channel. Much to his surprise, he found the crewmen waiting for him, supplies packed and ready to board. They were soon on their way back to England. He asked them how they knew to be ready for him. They told him they didn't know when he would return, but they were sure he would. So ever morning, the leader rolled up his bag, and packed his gear and told the crew to do the same saying, "Get your things ready, boys. The boss may come today." The crew leader did his crew a favour by keeping them prepared. Jesus called His disciples to watch because He would be coming back but they would not know when. Jesus could come back mid afternoon, in the evening, in the middle of the night or early in the morning. When he comes will you be ready? Will He find you watching for Him or will He catch you off guard?

In your life as it is now, are you ready to face Jesus? Have you asked him to forgive your sins – have you accepted him as your personal saviour? It is not too late – but He is coming and it could be soon – are you ready?

LET US PRAY