

MARK 13:12-37
WHEN WILL JESUS RETURN?

What a great passage for us to be looking at on this Sunday, which is “Christ the King” Sunday in our Anglican Church Calendar. And next Sunday, of course, is the first Sunday in Advent, and one of the things we do in the season of Advent is that we look forward to the return of Christ.

When will Jesus return? That is the question that Jesus addresses in today’s Bible passage. But notice I didn’t say he “answers” it. I said he “addresses” it. Because Jesus doesn’t actually answer the question for us – at least not how we would want him to. In fact, in this passage Jesus specifically tells us that the answer is simply not available to us.

In verse 32 he says: **“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”**

So, if you’re reading this passage or other similar passages, hoping to get a date that you can pop into your google calendar, **“Son of God returns, end of world, remember to wash hair,”** you’re going to be sadly disappointed.

Mind you, it hasn’t stopped a lot of people from dredging up a specific date and making false predictions. Wikipedia lists 54 failed prophecies of the second coming made between the 1200s and today all of them having claimed to have cracked the code buried within the Bible.

For instance, the early founders of the Seventh day Adventist movement predicted that Jesus would return in 1844. When that didn’t happen, subsequent leaders predicted 1964. The founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Charles Russell Taze, predicted 1874. The Mormons predicted 1891. The Catholic Apostolic Church predicted 1901. There was even an extremist group here in Australia, which predicted a specific day in 1924. They built a pavilion on Balmoral Beach and sold tickets for people to sit there on the day of his predicted return and watch Jesus come sailing through Sydney Heads!

There appears to be no end to the gullibility of some people!

So let me say again, the Bible NOWHERE gives us specific information – either explicit or in some kind of secret code – for working out the exact time of Jesus’ return. And anyone who says otherwise has completely ignored Jesus’ clear statement here; **“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”**

So, rather than providing us with an exact date, this discourse by Jesus gives us a series of SIGNS to look for, as the time for his return draws nearer, in order that – and here’s the important part – in order that we might get our lives in order and be ready for him. And I want to get to that part of the message pretty quickly.

But first, let’s have a brief look at this series of signs that Jesus lists.

SIGNS PRECEDING JESUS’ RETURN

1. Widespread persecution of Christians. (vv. 12-13)

“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved”

We have to be really careful not to be too restrictive or definitive in our interpretation of Jesus’ words. When he says **“EVERYONE will hate you”** it doesn’t necessarily imply UNIVERSAL persecution of Christians in every single nation and town and village. Jesus is probably using hyperbole at this point. But at the very least he is saying that as the time for his return draws closer, persecution of Christians will ramp up, all over the world.

2. In verse 14, Jesus then speaks of “The Abomination that causes desolation” which will set itself up, quote. **“where it does not belong”**, which is possibly a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem. And as a direct result of this, in verses 15 and following, the people will have to flee for their lives into the surrounding mountains and hills.

This is a quote from Daniel, and like many Bible prophecies, this appears to have multiple fulfillments. It's first fulfilment had already occurred by the time Jesus said this, in 168 BC, when Antiochus Epiphanes erected a pagan altar to Zeus in the Temple and desecrated it.

It certainly was also fulfilled in the lives of Jesus' hearers who witnessed the Romans desecrating the temple and then destroying it in AD 70. They then set up the Roman standard, bearing the image of the worshipped emperor, over the place where the temple had stood. And at the same time, the people of Jerusalem were forced to flee for their lives, from the city into the surrounding hill country. So, certainly, we can say that it was fulfilled in AD 70.

But it MAY have a second fulfilment. It may also be a reference to a supposed antichrist, if there is a literal such individual, who sets himself up as a figure of worship, possibly in Jerusalem at the sight of the old temple. 2 Thessalonians 2:4, is sometimes interpreted to describe such an event.

3. Thirdly, verses 21-23 indicate that there will be an increasing number of false messiahs and false prophets as the return of Jesus draws near. And this will result in many Christians being misled and deceived. Verse 22 says;

“For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

Once again, this had an immediate fulfilment for Jesus' hearers. In the years immediately following Jesus' ascension, a number of false messiahs appeared throughout Israel, claiming miracles, and making including false claims of Jesus having returned and taken his elect with him. So much so, that it caused great angst among the churches, because people feared they had missed out; they'd been left behind. In fact, there were so many of these false messiahs and false prophets wandering around, that Paul had to write his letters to the Thessalonians to assure them that Jesus HADN'T returned – that they HADN'T missed out – and urging them to disregard these false messiahs and prophets.

I'm sure this also continues to have an ongoing fulfilment, as there continue to be false prophets and claims of false messiahs today.

FIRST CENTURY FULFILMENT

So, in all of these things so far, there were very clear first century fulfillments for each one of them. Jesus is very concerned about the trials that the fledgling church was about to face, and he wanted to warn them, to prepare them for what they were about to go through.

So we must be very careful not to grab these ancient prophecies and immediately assume they are talking about eschatological events in our future. They are firstly, and foremost the pastoral warnings of a loving Saviour regarding the impending trials that his followers would soon face.

EVENTS IMMEDIATELY SURROUNDING THE SECOND COMING

But now we come to the part that IS clearly speaking about the second coming. And Jesus jumps right ahead now, to the events immediately preceding his return.

Let me read those words again, from verse 24:

“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

In other words, at the very moment of Jesus' return, there will be cataclysmic signs in the sky, involving the sun, moon and stars. A supernatural darkening of the sun and moon. And stars falling from the sky, meaning a huge, world-wide meteor shower.

God will put on a spectacular light show, so that no one will be in any doubt that the Lord of the universe is about to show up! And show up he will, because the next verse says:

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”

So, the return of Jesus will be public, and visible to all. Not some secret return where he whisks his people secretly off the planet. No! Revelation 1:7 says:

“Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all peoples on earth will mourn because of him.”

They will ‘**mourn**’, because when Jesus turns up in all his glory, those who doubted him and rejected him will realise that they made a monumental mistake – only by then it will be too late to change sides!

It is an awesome picture of the second coming of Jesus the Son of God. And it ought to stir our faith and strengthen our resolve, because on that day, Jesus will take us home, and all those who scoffed at him, who persecuted his people and ridiculed their faith, will be brought to their knees and forced to worship the true Lord of the Universe!

What an incredible picture this passage paints for us!

So let me finish with this important question.

HOW SHOULD THIS IMPACT MY LIFE?

The simple answer is, IT CHANGES EVERYTHING! IT CHANGES EVERYTHING! Because the second coming of Christ, puts the whole of life into a brand new perspective. It means that my life here on Earth is only temporary, and there is something much more important and enduring that I’m meant to be living for. It means that one day I am going to be accountable for my life, to the Lord of Life Himself! And I ought to live my life with that knowledge, not just at the back of my mind, but at the forefront of my mind. Because the second coming of Jesus changes everything!

And if that is indeed the case, I need to live every single day in readiness to meet my Lord.

And that is the essential message of the final two short parables that Jesus tells at the end of this chapter.

The first parable describes a fig tree which begins to sprout leaves as summer approaches, and Jesus says:

“As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.”

In other words, watch the signs of the times, and be ready for the return of the Lord. Don’t be caught unprepared!

Interestingly, Jesus finishes this parable with a puzzling statement:

“Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”

The “**these things**” mentioned here refers to the “**these things**” of verses 4 and 8 and the “**everything**” of verse 23 – all of which are speaking of the times of trial that are about to come upon the fledgling church – and it reinforces the view that this whole passage is primarily about things that were about to happen very soon for the disciples in the first century.

The final parable in the chapter, verses 32-37, is about servants who are looking after their master’s house and keeping watch for his return. And Jesus concludes the parable, saying:

CONCLUSION

I hope you’ve got that message today. Because that is really the whole point of this discourse. Jesus didn’t go to the trouble of explaining all this stuff, just so that we could sit around and pontificate about eschatological timelines and theorise about the end times. Jesus had a very practical, pastoral reason for telling us all this. And it’s this:

Be prepared! Live everyday as if Jesus is coming back today! Don’t get bogged down in WHEN Jesus is coming back. Live every day of your life as if Jesus is coming back TODAY!

Because the impending return of Christ ought to transform every single day of our lives. And if you haven't yet turned to Christ in faith and repentance, don't put it off a day longer! Because we honestly don't know how many days we have left.

May the impending return of Christ our Saviour transform your life, today and always.

AMEN.

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