

Sermon for Sunday 29 October 2023 – Bible Sunday

Pete Postle, Reader

Nehemiah 8.1-4a,8-12; Psalm 119.9–16; Colossians 3.12–17; Matthew 24.30–35

May all I say and think be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.
Would you like to sit please?

You might like to keep referring to your readings here. The Old Testament reading and the New Testament Gospel readings, I see like a pair of bookends, the beginning and the end of the Bible. First, the Old Testament. Nehemiah relates the years after the Babylonian empire had been overthrown by Cyrus, King of Persia, in 539 BC. There was a three stage return of the exiled tribes of Israel to their home country. Nehemiah is the head of the third, last stage in about 445 BC. And the intent is to rebuild the temple, the first, Solomon's, having been destroyed by the Babylonians. So you see how meetings have to be in a square in front of the Water Gate. That's probably near the Gihon Spring in that part of Israel, now called the ancient city of David. And the scribe Ezra reads them Moses' book of the law. That's the first five books in our Old Testament in our Bible.

Now, with a deep breath, I jump to the Gospel reading - one of the prophecies of the end time, which could be seen as effectively the final pages of our Bible. And that, my friends, brings me inevitably to our present times. Just before October the 7th, an old friend telephoned me to talk about religion. In particular, we are, she claims, in the end times, the second coming, the Parousia, if you want the Greek, or rather surprisingly, the Advensus in Latin, which thought should bring Paul's letter to the Colossians into sharp focus; your second reading, explaining how we should be preparing ourselves for just such an event, which could then urge you to read the very next verse in our New Testament reading. Matthew 24, then verse 36 - "But about the day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father." And that in contrast to the verse 34 you have got. 'Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place.'

How do we explain this difference? Was verse 34 an accurate quote from Jesus? Was verse 36 a later edition by the writer of Matthew's Gospel to explain why the Second Coming has been postponed. The explanation I'm going to ask you to consider is to focus on prophecies.

When I, as a young child, I'm talking of age nine, in case you have a temptation to think it happened when I was a lot older, if I threw a tantrum, my mum would say that if I didn't stop the noise, I'd have to go to bed. I can still remember the one occasion when her threat became a reality. The one occasion, that is, when her predictive prophecy became the reality. Prophecies are, by their nature, conditional. Listen to this quote from the prophet Jeremiah. 'Then the word of the Lord came to me. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom as I will plant it. But if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. So perhaps you accept that prophecy does not simply seek to predict the future, but to change the present, just like Paul

is urging to the Colossians and us to change our ways to the way of good. Can we apply Jeremiah's Word of God to the New Testament Gospels? Can we accept that the prophecies of Jesus are conditional? Do the writers of these Gospels and those epistles accept that proposition?

As an answer, I turn to the second letter of Peter, chapter three. In my Bible it's called 'The promise of the Lord's Coming.' Don't worry about the Peter bit. I don't think, perhaps a mate of Peter; I don't think it's Peter. Verse one. You should remember the words spoken to you by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour spoken through your apostles. Verse eight - 'One day is a thousand years to the Lord and a thousand years is one day.' Verse nine the - 'The Lord is not slow about his promise as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.' And verse ten - 'But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be dissolved with fire. And everything that is done on it will be disclosed.'

And the chapter and the letter ends with similar extultation to those we'd heard in Paul's letter - 'You therefore beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you're not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.'

Or, as we pray, may your kingdom come and may your will be done. Amen.