

**Word that Endures: Sermon for 29 October 2023 – Bible Sunday
Matthew 24: 30-35 & Colossians 3: 12-17 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

‘Heaven and earth may pass away, but my words will last for ever,’ says Jesus (Matthew 24: 35). When you see something but you’re not quite sure, normally, you can go back for another look. But, for what you hear, normally, you just get one chance. Did you hear that? – a rustle of leaves, a chirrup of birdsong, a voice in the mist? Missed it: it’s gone. But with the things of God, it’s the other way round. Visions only last for a moment, but the word lasts for ever.

God has been speaking from the very beginning, talking creation into being; and the last word belongs to him too: ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ His words echo across time and space. Certain humans have had a special vocation for catching hold of God’s speech and writing it down – whether in story or instruction, prophecy or poem, or vision put into words. Through these writings we get a sense of what the living God may be saying to us today. It’s the experience of believers that, whatever may change in human affairs – in technology or culture or language, whatever the storms of politics or revolution – these words have articulated the word of God, guiding, encouraging, challenging and transforming their lives. The word of the Lord endures for ever.

St Paul wrote, ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’ (Colossians 3: 16). ‘Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest’ (as the Collect has it) for holy Scripture is written for our learning. Sing it in hymns, Psalms and spiritual songs. Meditate on it. Absorb it. Let it direct you, like a rudder to a ship. Let it be a challenge, like a sword that cuts to the divide of bone and marrow, soul and spirit. Let it be a comfort, as honey to the lips or balm to the soul. Trust it. Trust God who speaks through it.

Study the Bible. Study it in all its glorious complexity, its difficulties and problem areas. What was first said of John’s Gospel is true of all Scripture – it’s like a pool in which a child can paddle and a giraffe can swim. There’s no shortage of material! It claims both human authorship and divine inspiration – if it was just one of those it would be relatively simple! But, like the incarnation, it can be said to be both fully human and fully divine. If you think that’s just a muddle, it probably won’t help you. But treat it as a mystery, and it’s life-transforming. By a mystery I don’t mean something you shrug your shoulders at and say, ‘Beats me!’ Or that it’s like an Agatha Christie murder, in which Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple will gather the protagonists and give the unlikely solution. A mystery is something you ponder and grapple with, holding it in faith and under tension and over time, refusing to let go of either the human or the divine, the complexity or the belief that the living God is speaking today through these ancient words. Do so prayerfully and asking for the Holy Spirit’s help. These are not dry academic texts, but access to the living word of God.

So what of today’s Gospel? What mystery is there to ponder here? We are presented with a glorious vision – a vision of glory! The Son of Man comes on the clouds. Trumpets are sounding. Angels are swooping. God’s people are being called together from across the world. This is the Parousia: after the wars and destruction predicted earlier in the chapter, Christ appears in glory. What’s the problem? Where’s the mystery? Verse 34 says: ‘This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.’ It doesn’t take a cynic to say, ‘Hang on a

minute! 2000 years have passed – however many generations that may be – and there’s been no sign yet. If Jesus is right, it should have happened long ago. And if he’s wrong, how do we know he’s not wrong on everything else?’

Unsurprisingly, a lot of ink has been spilled trying to resolve this question, wrestling with the mystery. Some will say it’s Matthew who’s misreported Jesus, but that leaves the same question: if he’s wrong on this, why not on everything else? Some will argue about the word ‘generation’: it could be translated as ‘race’ – but it’s unclear what sense would that make? Some will point to a get out clause: straight afterwards Jesus says, ‘No one knows about that day or hour, ... not even the Son, but only the Father.’ But if he’s saying here that he doesn’t know, why did he give a time frame only two verses earlier?

We need to dwell ‘richly’ with the passage, and realise there’s a lot going on here. It’s like a rope of several cords knotted tightly together.

- First, there’s clearly something about prophecy: verse 29 quotes Isaiah, and then the ‘Son of Man coming on the clouds’ is lifted from Daniel. This is happening in now, Jesus, we are being told.
- Then, if you look where we are in the Gospel, Jesus is preparing for his death. At this point, he’s giving a snap-shot of God’s long-term plan. No matter how bad things look now, Jesus will be vindicated. After his short stay on earth, he will rise through the clouds.
- Thirdly, in the Gospel, Jesus has just prophesied the downfall of the Jerusalem Temple. This happened in 70AD, and would be the current (or recent) affairs at the time when Matthew’s Gospel was written. So, Jesus is proved right: it happened just 40 years later. The current generation were still alive to see it.
- For Matthew’s readers, Jewish Christians of the later 1st century, it was impossible to imagine the end of the Temple would not precipitate the end of the age – God wrapping everything up for Jesus’ return – all within a generation.

There’s a lot tied together here in this short passage – multiple perspectives and time-frames, and all evidenced in God’s word. Why does it matter that what happened was prophesied by Isaiah and Daniel? Because it shows these were not random events but part of God’s purpose. Why does it matter that Jesus told his followers he would rise and be vindicated? Because they had to make sense of what seemed incomprehensible. Why does it matter that Jesus foretold the destruction of the Temple? Because people had to know he was offering a new and alternative way to the Father. In all these things, Jesus is vindicated – proved right. And so it makes sense to think of and hope in Christ’s return and future glory. It’s part of the package, even though it’s totally counter-intuitive, preposterous even, when the world looks like it’s going to rack and ruin, with war and destruction and climate emergency. There’s nothing we can infer from the way the world is to think Jesus will come and put it right. But we have his promise. And we keep faith his words will never pass away.

What do we do as a result? Passage after passage in Matthew’s Gospel, especially, tells us: keep on high alert, even though it’s a long time coming. Although the bridegroom takes his time, the land-owner is delayed, the Son of Man is not yet seen, still be ready. Live as if you know he’s coming today. He’s given his word that he’s on his way.