

TFTD 2025.34 Saturday April 12th

Back to the future: Luke 21



“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first: but the end is not yet.” Luke 21.9

In this chapter, Jesus takes time out to talk privately with his disciples about what lies ahead. Some of this is close at hand, like Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the temple (vv.5-6) and the siege of Jerusalem (vv.20-24) — which actually happened in AD 70, less than 40 years later. For Jesus and his disciples, this was in the future; but for Luke and his readers, it was part of a present and traumatic reality. Luke is very conscious of living in the ‘time of the Gentiles,’ when Jerusalem was being trampled by Roman armies (v.24). It must have felt like the end of the world — but it wasn’t (v.9).

The Roman empire claimed to bring ‘peace and concord’ for all its inhabitants, but there was plenty of unsettling news. There were times of political instability, like the years of the insane and capricious emperor Gaius Caligula (AD 37-41), who threatened to place a statue of himself right inside the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple — only averted by the emperor’s assassination. There were natural disasters (famine, earthquakes, the eruption of Vesuvius). There were constant ‘wars and insurrections’ across the empire, culminating in the tumultuous ‘Year of the Four Emperors’ in AD 69, with a succession of military coups until finally Vespasian emerged victorious to restore the stability of the empire. It was a scary time.

Our world too has its crisis points, the times when it looks as though the world as we know it is coming to an end: but *the end is not yet*. History is moving towards a final consummation, when the Son of Man will come with power and great glory (v.27) to

establish God's kingdom of justice and peace. It's important to remember that this is an indelible part of the Christian hope: that there will be a time when the world will finally be put to rights and God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. That's what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, and that's a hope to put a spring in our steps and resilience in our hearts: *Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near* (v.28).

But we're not there yet! And in the meantime, this chapter has some important instructions for Jesus' disciples (then and now) on living in the 'in-between times,' when God's kingdom is both 'now and not yet'.

- Don't be fooled by the impression of permanence (v. 5-6). Things may look solid — but they can crumple into dust.
- Don't be led astray by trying to calculate the precise timing of the end (vv. 7-8). The question '*When will these things be?*' is almost always a trap, a distraction from getting on with the job of seeking God's kingdom here and now.
- Don't be afraid (v.9). We don't know what's going to happen: but the future is all in God's hands.
- Don't waste mental energy trying to prepare for an unknown future (vv.12-19). *Make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.* I don't think this is an excuse for not preparing my sermons (!) — but rather a warning against that tendency (we all have it!) to waste all our energies mentally preparing for imaginary future scenarios which might never happen. When I went for my interviews for ordination, a wise friend said to me, "Stay close to God, and be yourself — then you'll know that whatever happens, it'll be all right."
- Keep watch, stay alert, and keep praying (vv.29-36). Stay focused and responsive to what God is doing in the present. Keep an eye out for those signs of spring!
- And don't despise the little things (vv.1-4)! The poor widow who gave all she had to God is a reminder that even when we think we're too insignificant to count, the little that we can do is infinitely 'worth it' in God's kingdom.

'God wants us to think of the Future just so much as it is necessary for *now* planning the acts of justice or charity which will probably be our duty tomorrow. The duty of planning the morrow's work is *today's* duty; though its material is borrowed from the future, the duty, like all duties, is in the Present. He does not want us to give the Future our hearts, to place our treasure in it. His ideal is someone who, having worked all day for the good of posterity (if that is their vocation), washes their mind of the whole subject, commits the issue to Heaven, and returns at once to the patience or gratitude demanded by the present moment. For the Present is the point at which time

touches eternity.' [C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, adapted.]
God bless,
Loveday

