

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 13 November 2022

God, the source of all light, by your word, give light to our lives. Amen.

Luke 21:5-19

Signs of a new beginning

In his book, *Paul – A biography*, New Testament scholar Tom Wright informs that many of us may understand Jesus' words of salvation quite differently from what Jesus delivered in the first century. He writes,

“...if we were to scour the first century for people who were hoping that their ‘souls’ would leave the present material world behind and ‘go to heaven,’ we would discover Platonists like Plutarch, not Christians like Paul...For Paul and all the other early Christians, what mattered was not ‘saved souls’ being rescued *from* the world and taken to a distant ‘heaven’ but the *coming together* of heaven and earth themselves in a great act of cosmic renewal in which human bodies were likewise being renewed to take their place within that new world.”¹

In this cosmic level of renewal of cosmos and creation, we can see something continuing while others cease to be simultaneously. Such as heaven, earth, and human bodies are still there – they continue. But they are totally renewed, suggesting discontinuity from the past. In today's reading, Jesus seems to tell us such a thing when he foretells destructive signs and persecution. These are the things that will discontinue when cosmic renewal is done. At the same time, keeping one's faith in God no matter what happens continues as faith will lead us to the new reality. Therefore, we see that signs Jesus foretelling play as reminders of a new beginning of the new world, allowing us to see beyond things that we see now. Luke's passage informs us of how this will happen through the signs, persecution and believers' life.

The signs

Signs that Jesus said here are not only about the end time but also about a new beginning. When Luke wrote this Gospel, a decade or more passed after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. When it comes to recalling something significant in the past, we may be able

¹ Wright, Tom (2018), *Paul-A Biography*, SPCK, London, UK. P8

to see it from a bird's eye view, which helps us see the bigger picture. We find parallels in Mark 13:5-37 and Matthew 24:1-36. Especially in Matthew, all these signs are referred to as 'the beginning of birth pangs.'² In doing so, we are informed that the signs are not the object to fear but for hope in the coming God's kingdom. As such, the use of apocalyptic language is not to threaten the audience but to show them how human achievements, such as the magnificent temple, can be dealt with by God for God's purpose. While foretelling its coming destruction, Jesus attempts to divert his disciples' attention from their fascination to something else. Just before this exchange, Jesus drew attention to a poor widow in the temple.³ When we read it as one passage, Jesus seems to tell them to focus their attention on the poor, not on the temple building. In doing so, Jesus tells his people that terrible events will not make them afraid when they continue their faith in God under any circumstances. Even though every age has its own false prophets, wars, and natural catastrophes, the point is that when bad things happen — and they will, we should not be terrified,⁴ or follow anyone proclaiming these are signs of God's judgment and the end⁵ as they will disappear (discontinuity) in the end. In the meantime, we should trust that God remains in our lives (continuity) until the end.

Persecutions

Another sign that Jesus details are persecution that his followers may face - arrests, persecution; trials before government authorities; betrayal by family and friends; hatred on account of Jesus' name; and even execution. As Jesus has to face rejection and death as a result of his prophetic message,⁶ anyone who follows Jesus may also expect the same hostility that Jesus and Israel's great prophets endured. But he also says that persecution is 'an opportunity to testify.'⁷ At first glance, Jesus seems to tell the disciples about the imminent dangers and how to endure. But it may have a deeper meaning as keeping the faith was not that simple in the past and present.

In the movie *Silence*, directed by Martin Scorsese, the director asks the viewers what faith means when believers undergo extreme persecution. *Silence* is based on a novel by Shūsaku Endō about Jesuit priests suffering for their faith in 17th-century Japan, where Christianity is outlawed. The film starts with a long moment of actual silence and embraces silence throughout

² Matthew 24:8

³ Luke 21:1-4

⁴ Luke 21:9

⁵ Luke 21:8

⁶ Luke 4:16-30

⁷ Luke 21:13

its running time or something akin to silence. Despite constant silent cries and prayers, the protagonist – one of three priests encounters God’s total silence. Facing fellow Christians’ imminent execution, the priest has to face a dreadful question: If he does break, does it mean he has failed God? Or does God want him to resist blasphemy no matter what the cost? When he is forced to renounce his faith to save his fellow believers, in his agony and vision, the priest encounters the suffering Jesus, who gently tells the priest that it’s okay to renounce Him -Christ Jesus. As viewers, we can’t help but ask the same questions that the priest asks God. What continues and what discontinues in this story do you think?

In the present, in New Zealand, we may not have such visible persecution. Still, we live in a similar environment when the apostle Paul wrote his letters to various churches. When Jesus says persecution is “an opportunity to testify,”⁸ we may wonder when it is such a moment to testify. On a daily basis, we meet many people at meetings, marketplaces, and elsewhere. What would our chances be if Jesus’ disciples had a chance to testify under persecution? We are called to testify what the truth is and who Christ Jesus is through deeds and words, even in silence. Just as God gave Moses and other prophets the capacity to speak to and confront their doubters and opponents,⁹ Jesus himself will provide strength and wisdom for such testimony.¹⁰

Believers’ Life

In our story time, we watched a girl help a bee by caring for it. She did everything the bee needed. She loved the bee and the bee the girl. But when she realized that the bee was missing its home despite every good thing that she provided. She finally decided to find its home so the bee would continually be happy. What continues and what discontinues here? The love between them continues whether they live together or are separated from each other. Overall what do all these narratives tell us today?

Despite its language and imagery of destruction, Luke 21:5-19 certainly informs us that our faith leads us to hope that God remains in the world. Even though things have gotten so bad, as if it feels like the world is closing in on us, our lives are living in hope in Christ. All those bad signs and visible or invisible persecution are the signs of a new beginning. So let’s trust in God, even in the midst of hardship, as it is what we will continually do indeed. Amen!

⁸ Luke 21:13

⁹ Exodus 6:28-7:13; Jeremiah 1:6-10

¹⁰ Luke 21:15