

WEEK 5: MONDAY

Browsing in an old library the other day, I came upon a book of cartoons from the late nineteenth century. They were political satires, commenting on the affairs of state of the time. Several different politicians were lampooned; all sorts of issues were obviously 'hot' at the time, with new laws some didn't like, the possibility of an unpopular war, and so on.

That much I could understand. But beyond that I couldn't go. I'm not a nineteenth-century historian, and I needed one right then to explain to me why this politician was drawn as a bird and that one as a zebra; why that particular law was unpopular; who was advocating the war, and who was resisting it. Several of the cartoons I couldn't even begin to understand. They had obviously been important in their own day, and would have had an instant impact. But without help I couldn't make head or tail of them.

Something of that same feeling of helplessness when faced with other people's symbols and images comes over us when we read ancient texts like Matthew 24 (which we do twice, today and tomorrow). What is the 'desolating sacrilege'? Who are these people who have to run away? What are these false prophets? What on earth is 'the coming of the Son of Man'?

Fortunately help is at hand. At the beginning of the chapter Matthew has made it clear that this is Jesus' answer to a double question. At the heart of it is Jesus' own solemn prophecy (verse 2) that the Temple is to be destroyed. We might have guessed from his action in driving out the money-changers that, like Jeremiah half a millennium earlier, he was denouncing the Temple and prophesying its fall, just as in the previous chapter he had denounced the Pharisees and warned of their imminent judgment. And, frankly, it didn't take much insight to see that if Jesus' contemporaries went on plotting and scheming against the power of Rome, sooner or later Rome would lose patience and send in the troops. So the disciples asked him when all this would happen — and what would be the sign of his 'coming', his royal enthronement, and of 'the close of the age', a cryptic way of saying 'the time when God finally does what he's promised and makes all things new'.

The difference between Jesus' prophecy of these forthcoming events and the speculations of his contemporaries was that he had a sense of his own role, his own fate, his own future being somehow bound up with it all. He wasn't just a spectator, a voice warning of danger. He was the one around whom Israel's God was re-ordering his people. He was the reality to which the Temple had pointed, the place and the means of God dwelling in person among his people. And he, like many others in his time, believed that this was the moment for the prophecies of Daniel to come true. Pagan hordes would place a blasphemous object in the Temple. Their armies would sweep through the holy land, and there would be no point in trying to hide in Jerusalem in the mistaken belief that it couldn't fall. The only solution would be to get out and run. And, in and through it all, there would be the 'coming' of the 'Son of Man'. Not his 'return', as many have supposed; as in Daniel, the 'coming' is his coming to God in vindication. He will be exalted; the Temple will be destroyed.

All these things, Matthew undoubtedly believed, took place within a generation. Jesus was exalted as sovereign over all (28.19); the Temple was destroyed in ad 70. But wise readers ever since have seen this specific prophecy as resonating out in wider circles. One day there will be

an even greater moment of judgment and mercy, at the time Jesus called 'the renewal of all things' (19.28). Pondering and praying our way through the turbulent first century can give us a clue to how we should be, faithful and prayerful, in our own day and beyond.

TODAY

Make us, gracious Lord, faithful and patient as events unfold around us, always eager to shelter in your protection and celebrate your victory.