



Matthew 24:3–8

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” 4 Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed.

Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.

Reflection

It's dusk on Tuesday evening. Jesus and his disciples have left the temple in Jerusalem and are journeying home to Bethany where they'll spend the night with friends. To do so they have to pass over the Mount of Olives and it's there that Jesus stops and sits down for a break in our passage today. Ringing in his disciples' ears is the comment that Jesus had made as they were leaving the temple. They were ad-

miring the size and majesty of its buildings, constructed in huge stone blocks, many of them as long as five metres in length, when Jesus had shocked them with these words from verse two of yesterday's passage,

2 “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

And so as Jesus sat down for a break on the Mount of Olives, which overlooked Jerusalem and the temple, his disciples came up to him and asked,

“Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of

the age?”

And in response to these two questions, Jesus begins his fifth and final discourse in Matthew's gospel. You'll remember that a feature of Matthew's gospel is the way he intersperses the story of Jesus' life with five key blocks of teaching presented as extended discourses. This final one is known as the Olivet discourse because Jesus gives it on the Mount of Olives. It includes both Matthew 24 and Matthew 25. The Olivet discourse is different to the others in that it consists entirely of prophecy. Jesus is predicting the future, prophesying in answer to the disciples' two questions. Here the two questions are again,

“Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign

of your coming and of the end of the age?”

The disciples are asking Jesus when exactly it is that the temple will be torn down, stone by stone, as Jesus has just told them and also what the sign will be of him returning at the end of the age – it’s likely that they are equating the two events in their mind, thinking that the temple will be destroyed when Jesus returns at the end of the age. But even if they think that these two events will occur simultaneously, they are asking two questions to which Jesus gives two extended answers. He answers the first question in verses 4 to 35 of Matthew 24 and their second question in the remainder of the chapter, from verse 36 to 50. Jesus then spends all of Matthew 25 teaching about his second coming in

parables.

In answer to their first question, about the timing of the destruction of the temple, Jesus begins:

Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.

The year is 33AD and historically, the temple in Jerusalem was violently torn down, literally stone by stone, by the Romans in 70AD. And here Jesus is prophesying that the intervening period of time will be tumultuous. After he is gone others will rise up, claiming to be prophets, claiming to be the Messiah and leading revolts against the Romans. There will be wars, rumours of wars, natural disasters, it might feel like the world is coming to an end. 'But don't be deceived', says Jesus. All these events are just the beginning, like birth pains compared to what will happen when the temple is destroyed. When I'm gone, all this will unfold but these won't be signs of the temple's imminent destruction, and certainly won't be signs of my return; just the beginnings, simply an anticipation of the terrible events that will occur when

the temple is destroyed.

Hardly comforting words for the disciples after such a day of confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. And in tomorrow's passage things will turn from bad to worse.

Think

But for now try and hold this scene in your mind as you think back over today's passage. Jesus has spent the day utterly denouncing the Jewish religious establishment, then mourning over Jerusalem as he leaves. And now, sitting sadly on the Mount of Olives and looking down over Jerusalem and the temple Jesus is predicting the destruction and razing of God's holy city, his people and their temple, nev-

er to be rebuilt. And these are just the beginnings of birth pains. Even the temple's destruction will be just the beginning to a world wracked with wars and rumours of wars, false leaders doing Satan's bidding, earthquakes and natural disasters; a world that will reel from sins devastating effects and consequences right up until Jesus' return. This is our world, our reality, just as much as theirs. Something is very wrong in our world. It's called sin. And its devastation and misery will be with us until the day Jesus returns and makes everything new.

Pray

Spend some time today praying for our world. War. Rumours of wars. Atrocity and evil done in the name of religion. Earth-

quakes and natural disasters. God's precious children everywhere suffering under the weight of sin's effects, creation itself groaning because of sin. Cry out to God today for our world. You may even feel like weeping over the state of our world just as Jesus mourned over Jerusalem. He knew what was coming for Jerusalem. And we know what is coming for our world and those in it who die outside of a saving relationship with Jesus. Do you weep for them? Weep for them this morning. Pray to God for his mercy upon those who are suffering. Pray for relief for those who are being persecuted. But above all pray that sin's effects would be seen for what they are in our world and that people would turn back to God in great numbers before it is too late. And pray that Jesus would come again soon and set everything right.