

Fridge Magnets for Christmas

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 825 to the second reading from Mark chapter 13.

Today is what's traditionally in the Christian calendar called Advent Sunday and the four Sundays before Christmas. I often have a focus of anticipating Jesus coming at Christmas and also a focus of anticipating his return at the end of history.

So this week and the next two, we're looking at this chapter in Mark's gospel, which has the focus of expecting Jesus' return. Let's pray. God, our heavenly father, speak to us now from your word. Write it on our hearts that we may not only understand it and believe it, but also obey it. For Jesus' sake. Amen. New York, Madrid, London, Jakarta, Gaza, Bali, Amman, Baghdad, places where terrorist acts have occurred in recent years.

Others could be added to the list. Could Melbourne be next? The video that was released or found rather by, put together by Al-Qaeda suggests that Melbourne may well be a target for them.

[1 : 32] And of course, we've seen in the last two or three weeks, the arrest of several men in both Melbourne and Sydney with allegedly connections to terrorist cells in our country.

We're undergoing the process of new anti-terrorism laws that have raised all sorts of issues and consternation in our society. Raises the issues about how do we respond?

Are we safe?

Backpack, wander in, look around. Not particularly look at home in the service. Sit down for a while and get up and leave. And apparently lots of eyes turned to his empty seat to check that the backpack that he had had gone with him when he left.

But of course, the government has reassured us. So there's no need to worry. Be alert, but not alarmed. And I'm sure, therefore, our fears dissipate with those wonderfully encouraging words from our wonderful government.

[2 : 55] We can all now rest in peace, surely, if you excuse the double entendre of that expression. And you may remember a few years ago we got that wonderfully protective kit from the government about how to respond in terrorist times.

Be alert, but not alarmed. A fridge magnet that you could put on your fridge. I must confess mine went into the bin without really even opening the package, much to my consternation since. And so on. And I remember, I'm sure it was a loony cartoon in the age. I actually rummaged through loony cartoon books in the bookshop the other day trying to find this, but I couldn't. Of a terrorist attack.

And whether it's Mr Curley or one of his characters holding the fridge magnet. I am protected against terrorism because of this fridge magnet. Be alert, but not alarmed.

My guess is that the government didn't realise how biblical they were with that expression a few years ago. For we find it through this chapter, Mark 13. Be alert, but not alarmed.

[4 : 00] The focus of this chapter is not a terrorist activity. It's the destruction of Jerusalem, though. But it's also the coming judgment of God at the end of time.

The words in this chapter were spoken by Jesus a few days, a couple of days before his death on the cross. He's arrived in Jerusalem on the Sunday for the Passover festival.

In the days following that, he's been teaching in the temple precincts. He's been staying out of Jerusalem in Bethany, it seems, on the far side of the Mount of Olives. It's approximately a two kilometre walk from the Temple Mount of Jerusalem.

The end of one of those days, we're told at the beginning of chapter 13, that as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings.

Sometimes those words by the disciple have been interpreted as being like a tourist. Here's a person from the back blocks of Galilee.

[5 : 01] He's come to Jerusalem and he's seen this majestic temple and he's saying, in effect, Wow, isn't this beautiful? It's better than the tourist brochures ever anticipated. I wish I had my digital camera on me to take a photograph for all the uncles and aunts back in Galilee.

But it's probably a bit more than that as well. It's not just a sort of, wow, isn't this a beautiful building? But as he says, look at these large stones and what large buildings.

He's also acknowledging not just the physical grandeur, but the temple was the place of God's presence. It was a secure place, in a sense, in the midst of the nation. And so there's probably a theological undercurrent to what's being said about the profound security that God brings demonstrated by these buildings here in the centre of Jerusalem.

It's certainly true that the temple of Jesus' day was majestic. The first temple was built by Solomon in 950 BC, so almost a millennium before these words were spoken by Jesus.

It had been destroyed after 400 years by the Babylonians in 586 and then rebuilt under provocation by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, completed in 515 BC.

[6 : 19] And that temple had stood through the 500 plus years, but in the years immediately leading up to Jesus' birth, the years of his life, it had been significantly refurbished and rebuilt under Herod the Great, who by now was well and truly dead.

But those works were still sort of grinding on. It's one of those building projects that seem never quite to be finished. I'm not quite sure of an Australian equivalent, but there's a cathedral building in Barcelona that they've been building for over 120 years.

And they're still well and truly on the way. I mean, it could take another 120 years to complete it.

Well, that's the sort of thing that Jesus had visited, a huge refurbishment extension of it.

The temple mount platform that was artificial on which the temple was built was thoroughly extended by Herod the Great. It now incorporated an area of 35 acres, several metres long and wide and so on, colonnades around the top, the temple on top with gold and marble, very ornate, itself being refurbished in Herod's day.

The disciples comment about the stones. Jerusalem is known for its stone. Most of its buildings are Jerusalem stone buildings. The stones of Herod's refurbishment are significantly large.

[7 : 45] If you've ever seen Stonehenge in England, those stones are like pebbles by comparison. One particular stone, which you can actually see if you go, in effect, down underneath the temple mount into the tunnels on a tourist tour, that stone is 15 metres long, two and a half high.

No one's quite sure how deep it is because you can't get behind it. It's estimated to weigh between 420 and 600 tonnes, which is massive.

So when Jesus says all these stones are going to be overturned, it's an astonishing statement to say. When he says that in verse 2, These stones by Herod the Great were huge and still today are remarkably flush, one with each other, so that you can't often put a knife or anything down between them.

They are so beautifully cut and preserved together. So Jesus, when he says in verse 2, Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down.

He's saying not just something by way of prediction of destruction, but it's about such huge stones that they will be thrown down and destroyed.

[8 : 56] It's an astonishing reply. Jesus is not making a light comment here. It's a serious comment, a solemn word.

The temple was regarded as virtually sacrosanct in Jewish society, immovable, protected by God for eternity. But Jesus' words no doubt would have evoked recollections of the Old Testament passages that deal with Jerusalem's destruction 600 years before.

Words from prophets such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the Book of Lamentations, etc. Having crossed then down the Kidron Valley, a little stream creek sort of thing, up onto the Mount of Olives, Jesus with his disciples now are looking back over the Temple Mount.

The Mount of Olives is actually higher than Jerusalem's hill where the Temple Mount is. The best view even today of the old city of Jerusalem. And there with his disciples, they're sitting, looking back on Jerusalem, maybe having a break in their walk back to Bethany.

Peter, James, John and Andrew, four of those disciples, asked Jesus privately in verse 4, tell us when will this be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?

[10:16] Two questions, when and what will be the sign for the destruction of the stones of the Temple of Jerusalem? And Jesus' reply takes up really the rest of this chapter, which we'll see today and the next two Sundays.

He doesn't, in one sense, clearly or explicitly answer those questions. He doesn't give a date and the signs that he gives us, not by way of a timetable so that they can anticipate when this will occur. Well, this and then this and then this. And when that happens, then you'll know that this is about to happen. It's not quite like that. It's a slightly, we might say, more implicit answer to those two questions.

But it's got a slightly different thrust as well. Jesus is not really fundamentally concerned about when, so that his disciples have got details of dates and times, not for their head information. The thrust of this passage is, be alert but not alarmed. That is how to respond to the events that will lead up to both the destruction of Jerusalem as well as the final judgment of God when Jesus returns in glory.

[11:31] I guess if he had them from his government, he would have handed out fridge magnets on the Mount of Olives. Be alert but not alarmed. His warnings relate, firstly to the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

In 70 AD it occurred, after an increasingly hostile relationship between the Jews and the Roman authorities that had occupied the land.

But Jesus' words take us beyond those events to the final judgment when he will return. Because the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD is not the final act of God's judgment.

It was an act of judgment. But it was a precursor for his final judgment on the final day. Well today's verses up to verse 13 highlight three features of what to expect in the times around the destruction of Jerusalem and beyond.

Three things. Deception. Wars and famines and so on. And thirdly, persecution. And for each of those three, these verses highlight beware or be alert.

[12:43] Do not be alarmed. See in verse 5, the first issue is deception. Beware, he says, that no one leads you astray.

Many will come in my name and say, I am he, and they'll lead many astray. Jesus is not wanting to just give information. Many will come and lead you astray. But the focus and force of what he's saying is, beware, because many will come to lead you astray.

And certainly that happened in the years after Jesus' death and resurrection and leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. No doubt exacerbated by Roman rule over Palestine of that day, as people longed for and had an eager anticipation for the coming of a rescuer, a Messiah, to overthrow Roman rule.

But even beyond 70 AD, there are those who've come in the name of Christ to lead people astray. There are many false religions around in our own day that are somehow connected with false claims about who Jesus is.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons and other sort of semi-Christian or non-Christian sects and so on. Jesus is saying, know who Jesus is as given to us in the Scriptures and don't be misled, don't go astray by false teachers who will come in my name over the years.

[14:07] The second feature is the feature of wars, earthquakes, famines and so on. verses 7 to 8 describes that and yet again, preface with the exhortation, don't be alarmed.

Verse 7, when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. These things must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There'll be earthquakes in various places. There'll be famines. This is but the beginning of birth pangs. Well, all of those things happened in the lead up to 70 AD.

There were earthquakes in Laodicea in modern Turkey in 61, in Pompeii, south of Rome in 62 AD, 17 years before Vesuvius erupted and destroyed the city. There were certainly famines near the end of Nero, the emperor's reign over the Roman Empire.

He died in 68, leading to significant destabilisation in Roman Empire leadership and famines were a mark of that sort of thing in the latter part of his reign.

[15:14] There were certainly wars and rumours of wars in Palestine itself with the Nabataeans and Parthians, but also with the growing escalation of fighting between Jews and Romans which led to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Jesus is saying don't be alarmed when those things happen. But he's also saying this is not the very end. That is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, that's not the end of it.

That's not the final act of God's judgement. It's still a precursor of the very end. So see what he says at the end of verse 7, the end is still to come. At the end of verse 8 he says this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

That is the birth pangs of God's new and glorious kingdom to be born in a sense, but the pain leading up to that, the pain of judgment and tribulation and so on, the destruction of Jerusalem is but the beginning of that.

That will culminate only when Jesus returns as we'll see in the next two weeks as well. But there's reassurance here. Jesus says these things must occur in verse 7.

[16:25] And that little idea of these must occur is anchoring all these events of catastrophe, wars, earthquakes and famines under the sovereign control and hand of God.

They must happen. They're in God's plan to happen. He's in charge of these things is what Jesus is in effect saying. You see so often wars or earthquakes or famines shake Christians' faith.

Not to be, Jesus is saying. These things must happen. God is still in control. Though the earth will be in tumult through wars and famines and earthquakes, God is in control.

God is sovereign. Your faith ought not to be shaken even if the earth is. Rather, these things are signs of the coming judgment. And when Jerusalem will fall, that's still a sign of the end judgment itself.

The overthrowing, not one stone left upon another is not the final judgment act of God at all. Rather, when earthquakes, famines and wars occur, we're to anticipate the final judgment of God and long for Jesus coming for the glorious kingdom of peace that is yet to come.

[17:45] So deception, firstly, wars and so on, secondly, and then thirdly in this passage today, persecution. And like the previous two features, this one too is anchored with the exhortation, beware, or that is, be alert.

Verse 9, as for yourselves, beware, for they'll hand you over to councils and you will be beaten in synagogues. You'll stand before governors and kings because of me as a testimony to them.

Jesus is warning his immediate disciples and followers of persecution to come. And these things happened in the lead up to 70 AD. Indeed, if you read just the Acts of the Apostles, most of these things are fulfilled even in that book in the New Testament.

So before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, Jesus went, some of his followers went, before Gentile Roman councils, some of his followers went in Acts 4, 5, for example. His apostles were beaten in Acts 5.

Stephen was stoned to death in Acts 7. Paul beaten in Acts 16. Paul was taken before governors and kings towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, all of those things happened to Jesus in the very days after he spoke these words as he awaited his Friday morning execution.

[19:06] But again, there's a sense of delay here. It's not the very end. So verse 10 puts a bigger context on it. And the good news, the gospel that is, must first be proclaimed to all nations.

So even while these things are happening and while persecution is occurring against the followers of Jesus, the good news, the gospel about Jesus' death and resurrection is to be proclaimed to all nations.

Later in the Acts of the Apostles and in Romans, Paul acknowledges that in effect that's already occurred in his lifetime, spread throughout the Roman Empire. Now sometimes Christians today, I think, misunderstand this statement here and say, well Jesus can't return very soon because there are still nations or at least people groups who have yet to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there are all sorts of mission type research groups that list how many language groups or people groups there are in the world, how many have received the Christian gospel at some point. And there are still several hundred, I think, yet to receive the Christian gospel in their own language. I think that's misunderstanding this passage and the thrust of the New Testament. Jesus could come very soon.

[20:21] The gospel even in our day has gone out in effect to the ends of the earth. There's no one nation in this world that has yet to hear in some form the Christian gospel, even if there may be people or language groups yet to hear it in their language.

We ought not in some way take this verse and construe it so that we think there is still yet a long time before Jesus may return. Rather, the thrust of the New Testament is he could come at any

time and our prayer ought to be that he comes quickly.

Jesus adds some reassurance for those followers of him who will undergo or face opposition and persecution, those who will be brought before councils to give some answer to their activity or belief.

He says in verse 11, when they bring you to trial and hand you over, the same words that are used of Jesus later in the very next chapter as he's handed over to the Roman and Jewish authorities, then do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given to you at that time for it's not you who speak but the Holy Spirit.

That's not an excuse for us not to understand the gospel so that we can enunciate it. It's not an excuse for us to be lazy about our faith and just say, oh God will give me words.

[21 : 42] But rather when we are brought before a trial not to worry and panic, God will speak through us by his spirit. And again in the Acts of the Apostles we see this occurring time and again in situations of critical trial the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and speak.

It doesn't mean that they're let off or exonerated or acquitted by the Gentile authorities indeed. Stephen full of the Holy Spirit spoke and was stoned to death. But God will speak and use those circumstances for his glory.

We can trust that and therefore as verse 11 says do not worry. But finally though in verse 12 and 13 we see the depth of persecution.

You see persecution is not just by governmental authorities bringing Christians on trial, persecuting them in that way. It's not by our society sort of imposing economic sanctions against Christians although that certainly happened in the first century to Christians in the Roman Empire.

But harder still are the family divisions and family persecution. Maybe not persecution by way of pain or beating but persecution in the sense of estrangement or alienation or division within families.

[23 : 03] Brother will betray brother to death. A father, his child and children will rise against parents and have them put to death and you'll be hated by all because of my name. The gospel of Jesus Christ is wonderfully good news.

The best news that anybody could ever hear and yet to this day remains hugely controversial. It astonishes me sometimes to see how people who are so liberal and so tolerant about anything and everything in our society remain so fundamentally hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ and those who profess his name and follow him.

And yet it happens time and again even in our secular so called society where anything and everything goes. It's often the name of Jesus and his gospel and those who follow him that incur the wrath or hatred of so many even sometimes within their own family.

We are to expect it, not to be alarmed by it, not to panic by it. It's a mark of the age in which we live as Christian people both in the years immediately after Jesus up to 70 AD but every generation ever since and it will be the same for every generation until Jesus returns.

Jesus is saying in effect here that our heavenly family is the one that takes precedence over our earthly family. Three times in these verses then Jesus has said beware, don't be alarmed, beware or be alert.

[24 : 33] There's more to come in the verses we'll see next week as well. Christians never live in an easy world. We always live in the world that threatens to lead us astray in a world of wars, earthquakes and famines as 2005 has reminded us yet again and we also live in a world where people oppose the Christian gospel, often even our own families.

Jesus was asked when will these things happen and what will be the sign. In effect he said so far these are the things to expect, they're signs of the judgment that's coming.

Deception, earthquakes, wars and famines and persecution. They will mark the age from the crucifixion of Christ to his return and so they do.

And he's saying that in effect the destruction of the temple is not itself the end event either. There is more yet to come as we well know living in the 21st century.

But Jesus thrust here is not to say what in answer to the question will be the sign but how to respond. And so the end of verse 13 adds that note again.

[25 : 52] The one who endures to the end will be saved. That is in effect Jesus is saying endure in your faith to the end for salvation.

That is when those come along to attempt to lead you astray to follow false messiahs or religions, hold fast to your faith in Jesus Christ to the end.

When there are earthquakes and wars and famines that may seek to destabilise your faith, hold fast in your faith to the end and be saved. And when you face opposition, whether it's before governmental authorities, whether it's economic sanctions, whether it's people in the schoolyard or the workplace who somehow ostracise you or even worse and harder in the family that alienate you because you're a Christian, hold fast in your faith in Christ to the end and be saved.

Psalm 46 captures that idea very well of holding fast in the midst of all these things. That's why we sang the first hymn. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble and therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city. It shall not be moved. A few days after these words were spoken, Jesus was executed on the Friday morning.

[27 : 32] There, in those darkened skies, the earthquakes and so on that followed, God's judgment occurred in a sense to its full, focused on his own son, on that atoning death on the cross.

Jesus himself endured, full of faith and obedience, to the end. And just a few more days later, rose from the dead and later again ascended to heaven in glory.

And as the words of Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament make clear, his resurrection body was a new temple into which through faith we are incorporated, a body, a temple that will never be defeated, that will never be overthrown.

The one who endures to the end will be saved because of Jesus Christ taking God's judgment for us all. Amen.