

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

World Ends Today

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Big idea: The day of the Lord will be unexpected, sudden, destructive – and entirely predictable!

Big application: Stop reading signs to predict the time of Jesus' return OR start reading signs to see the inevitability of Jesus' return.

What do the following dates have in common?

15th September 1829

22nd October 1844

1874

1891

1914

1975

28th June 1981

21st June 1982

13th September 2007

30th September 2008

21st May 2011

21st October 2011

I imagine most of you will have guessed that they are a small proportion of the dates put forward, in complete confidence, over the last 200 years, by various different Christian churches and their offshoots for the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

Such predictions have, in fact, been around throughout the entire history of the church. Which is strange.

Strange firstly because you would think that someone like Harold Camping, the man responsible for the May and October 2011 dates in my list, would have looked back at all the previous entries that proved to be a load of nonsense and decided to be a bit more cautious about such predictions.

And strange, secondly, because this passage in 1 Thessalonians 5, which I'm sure all those predicting these dates had read, and *every other passage in the New Testament* concerned with the timing of the second coming, teaches that predicting a date, or even reading certain events in the world as signs of the second coming, is not only foolish but wicked.

Many of us, no doubt, feel a certain amusement at people like Harold Camping. I'm one of those people. His teachings were ridiculous, laughable and damaging to the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians ought to chuckle at them to show the world that date setting and silly predictions are no part of the message we are bringing to the world.

But some of us here today, I suspect, think in a way which makes exactly the same error as Harold Camping did, just in a less spectacularly public way. This

morning if you have thought that the current financial crisis is a sign of when Jesus is going to return you have fallen into the same error as the people whose dates we smile and shake our heads at. If you have ever said that an earthquake, tsunami, war or famine is a sign that Jesus return is going to happen in this generation you are making the same mistake that Paul here, and Jesus elsewhere, warn about.

1 There are no signs of when Jesus is coming back

The Thessalonian Christians had the benefit of several weeks worth of personal instruction from the apostle Paul on the core elements of the Christian faith. As we've seen again and again over the last 8 weeks the big themes that Paul wanted them to understand could really be summed up in three words: faith, love and hope.

He taught them what the Christian faith was – the historical events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that they needed to trust in to get right with God.

He taught that what love was – that at the heart of what God wants for his people is not the performance of religious duties but a heart which is transformed so that we love him our creator, and other people, especially other Christians.

And he taught them about hope – about the plans and purposes God has for the people he sent his Son to save. He taught them, as we saw just back in chapter 4, that the Christian faces death and suffering not with despair but with confidence, because, just as Christ himself was raised from the dead so, on his return, will all Christians, both those who are alive when he comes and those who have, as Paul put it, fallen asleep, be raised to be with God forever.

As well as all this, Paul says, he taught them, v1, about the 'times and dates.' The timing of the 'day of the Lord', as he refers to it in v2, was a subject that the Thessalonian Christians were familiar with. Because they knew all about this teaching Paul moves through a very quick summary of it before getting to what he really wants to talk about: how Christians should go about their daily lives in the light of the day of the Lord.

We're going to look at that in detail next week in v4-11. But I suspect that not all of us are as informed about 'times and dates' as the Thessalonians were by the time Paul had given them all the information he thought was important. Lots of you here this morning are quite new Christians, which is brilliant. Many of you this morning are not Christians at all yet – you are just investigating what the Christian faith is and what it has to say about

life – you are really welcome. Some of you have come from backgrounds where you have been told quite contradictory or confusing things about the timing of the return of Jesus.

So, for this morning, before we come next week to the implications of the timing of Jesus' return, we're going to look in some detail at the different elements of the summary Paul gives in these verses. We're going to try and get an understanding of these events so we can have a good foundation to explore their implications next time.

Let's start then by getting clear what this "day of the Lord" actually is! The 'day of the Lord' is a fairly common phrase throughout the Bible. It always refers to a time when God will judge and defeat his enemies. It's mentioned in loads and loads of places in the Bible – some of them on the PowerPoint at the end if you want to look them up – but let me read just one of them from the Old Testament prophet Zephaniah, it'll appear on the screen if you want to follow along:

The great day of the LORD is near— near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers.

Zephaniah uses the word darkness, battle and trumpet to describe the day of the Lord – all words used in 1 Thessalonians. This day is the day of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the day of judgment. The second advent. The end of the world.

It is the day when dead Christians are raised and living Christians given their resurrection bodies. It is the day when Satan is destroyed and those who reject Christ follow the devil to eternal judgment.

So when will this day be? That's a question that God's people have always asked. The Old Testament prophet Daniel asked God how long it would be before "all these amazing things are fulfilled." The followers of Jesus, as we heard in our reading from Matthew's gospel at the beginning of the meeting, asked what would be the signs of Jesus coming and of the end of the age.

Today the enormous number of web sites and groups dedicated to researching and publicising dates for the return of Christ demonstrates the massive interest Christian people still have in finding out exactly, or at least approximately, when Christ will return.

But I want to say to you this morning that such interests are, at best, a distraction. In fact an interest in whether this world event or that indicates the return of Jesus may lead to you wasting your own life with silly prognostications and, worse, might put unbelievers off trusting in Jesus for themselves.

So let me give you three reasons why Christians should never, ever put dates, or even approximate periods on the return of Christ, the day of the Lord.

The first is a reason from church history. If you look back through the beliefs of Christian people over the last 2,000 years there is not one generation in which **some** people didn't think they were the last generation before the return of Christ. At every point in Christian history God's people have looked around them at the state of the world and concluded that everything is in such a mess that Jesus must be about to come back.

I think there are a couple of reasons why that's happened. One reason is that we all tend to overestimate our own importance (it's in our sinful nature!) and so we all tend to overestimate the importance of the events going on around us. Listening to the commentators talking about the financial crisis you would think it's the worst one ever. And listening to some Christians talk about it you would think that it can be read as a sign of the return of Christ.

But when the South Sea Company collapsed in Britain in 1720 and the chancellor of the exchequer, amongst others, found to be guilty of fraud people thought that was the worst one ever (and, interesting a motion was proposed in Parliament that bankers be tied up in sacks full of snakes and tipped into the Thames – which I think you could charge good money to go and see these days!). People said the Great Depression of the 1930s was the worst ever.

It's the same with wars, terrorist attacks, earthquakes, volcanoes and diseases. In each generation we are so self-obsessed that tend to overlook the sufferings of people in the past and assume that things are particularly terrible now – and that therefore the Day of the Lord **MUST** be just around the corner.

Well yes those things are all around us. But the truth is that we actually live at the safest time in history. It is only since 1945 that global life expectancy has been over 40 years – it's now 67.2 years. We all tend to overestimate the importance of the things going on immediately around us.

The other reason people throughout church history have tended to imagine they were the last generation before the return of Christ is that they have looked at the words of Jesus about wars, famines and earthquakes, seen wars famines and earthquakes and imagined these were the signs of the end. But that's not what Jesus said. He explicitly taught that those things were not the sign of his immediate return but just the **beginning** of the birth. In all those previous generations those who said that the signs of the day of the Lord were now here were wrong. Learn the lesson of history.

The other reasons why Christians should never, ever put dates, or even approximate periods on the return of Christ, the day of the Lord are in our passage this morning.

The second reason is the phrase “times and dates,” perhaps better “times and seasons” itself. Every time this phrase is used in Greek literature it always refers to an indefinite time in the future. The one thing you can know about “times and dates” is that you cannot know in advance which times and which dates they are.

But the third, and best, reason why we should not attempt to guess or pinpoint, even approximately, the date of the return of Christ, is that, v2, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When he uses that phrase Paul is deliberately echoing the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 24, a passage Jesus also said that “no-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven.”

What will the day of the Lord be like? It will be like a thief in the night. Anyone here ever had a burglary in their home? Did the thief let you know he was coming? Did he send you a friendly text message? Did he perhaps do this (Facebook event slide)? No I thought not. That’s the whole thing about the Day of the Lord. It’s like a thief in the night. You don’t know when it’s going to come. You can’t know. Even approximately.

OK you might say. I sort of get what you mean that Christians shouldn’t be setting a particular date, or perhaps even a particular year. But we do know something about the thief don’t we – he’s going to come in the night. So doesn’t that mean we can have an approximate idea when Jesus might be coming back? Aren’t there some signs we can read in the world around us that tell us which period of history is “the night”?

Well yes – and no. There are clear signs of when it is the night. At the risk of stealing next week’s talk we can see then in 5:7 – the signs of the night are that non-Christian people are sleeping, they are not ready of Jesus return, and that people at that time in history suffer from a lack of self-control and get drunk.

Which period of history is that? Well it sounds pretty much like all of history to me! When is the “night” in which the thief will come? When is the time at which Jesus could come suddenly? It is the whole of history since these words were written.

There is absolutely no point whatsoever trying to predict the date, even approximately, of the return of Jesus Christ. They Day of the Lord could be today. Or it could be another 10, 100, 1,000 or 10,000 years. We don’t know. Nobody knows. There are no signs that will come to show us, even approximately, when it’s going to be. It’s like a thief in the night.

That is deliberate on the Jesus’ part. He does not want us to know. Partly because, as we’ll see next week, he wants every generation of Christians to be prepared all the time for his return. And partly because it’s a vital tool in our evangelism.

Last week, as we looked at the passage about grief and loss in chapter 4, I said to those here who are not Christians that you must not wait to make things right with God through Jesus because you do not know how long your life will be. Today I say to you, if you are here this morning and you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, if he is not your king, that you might not even get to the end of your life before he comes to judge. It might not be cancer or a stroke or a heart attack or a car crash that brings you before the Lord. He might return today. So make it right with him before he does.

Whenever you meet a Christian who seems even a little bit interested in “the end times,” who is really into the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, or whether particular military alliances match events they see predicted in the book of Revelation or who think that some new technology is a sign of the mark of the beast you should be concerned for that person.

Not because what they are believing is some terrible heresy. It’s not like denying that Jesus is the Christ or anything like that. But it is cutting against the grain of Scripture. Such beliefs are a distraction from the most important thing that Jesus and Paul taught about Jesus’ return – that it will be sudden, unexpected and unpredictable.

There are no signs of when Jesus is coming back.

Now I suspect the majority of us are sitting here this morning feeling maybe just a little bit smug. Because although most of us have probably wondered in a casual way at one time or another whether a particular event in the world signals the return of Jesus, I don’t think we are, on the whole, over obsessed as a group of people with “times and dates.”

If that’s you then allow me to draw your attention to the fact that the thief in the night is not the only image Paul uses in these verses. He has a second illustration in v3. It’s an example which reminds us that...

2 **There is every sign that Jesus is coming back**

“While people are saying, peace and safety, destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”

At first sight it looks as if Paul is simply saying that the destruction, the Day of the Lord, is sudden.

But if that’s all this example told us it wouldn’t really add anything to the example of the thief in the night, who also comes suddenly. And if you were looking for

an illustration of sudden and unexpected pain, birth pains are actually a pretty odd thing to choose.

After all there are many sudden onset pains – migraine, appendicitis, heart attack – all of which were well known in the ancient world.

But childbirth isn't really like any of them. Because, as the mothers and expectant mothers among us know, the pains of actual childbirth are preceded by all sorts of other aches and discomforts!

So why does Paul choose this example? Because, unlike most of the other sudden pains we can suffer from, pregnant women know that childbirth is going to happen. Like the coming of the Lord Jesus, the coming of the pregnant woman to labour is both sudden (nobody, even in our incredibly advanced western societies) knows when it is going to happen AND it is inevitable.

The parallel isn't exact – the Day of the Lord could have been any day for the last 2,000 years or the next 2,000! Childbirth has, fortunately, a more limited range of dates! But in both cases you can be certain about the event and you cannot be certain about the time.

And if there are some people in the church, and perhaps in our church, who are excessively interested in naming a date or spotting signs of the return of Christ, I suspect there are rather more of us whose temptation is to ignore the pregnancy.

The people of the world do not believe that Jesus is coming back. Go out and ask in the streets of Liverpool this afternoon. They do not believe in the day of the Lord. So they go round saying "peace and safety." Paul doesn't mean by that phrase that the people of the world think everything is OK. But they do think that the world will definitely go on tomorrow, just as it has today. They do think that whatever problems there are in the world can be solved by spending more on vaccinating children in the developing world, providing more wells, sending in an army or printing more money. All of those may be good things to do sometimes. But they are not the ultimate solutions to the world's issues because they ignore the biggest problem.

The world is coming to a crisis. And the people of the world are steadfastly ignoring all the signs of it, signs that have been with us for 2,000 years. The people of the world are like a woman with a swollen belly, who has felt nauseous about food for months, who is walking with a slight waddle but is making plans for a six month expedition trekking in Antarctica. They do not believe in the Day of the Lord.

Quite a lot of us, though if we are Christians by definition we believe in the Day of the Lord, we know that Jesus Christ is coming back in glory to judge the world, are tempted to live as if he isn't.

Perhaps because we have seen the unbalanced Christian life of people who are wrongly certain the Day of the Lord will happen in our lifetimes, some of us live as if we're certain it won't happen in our lifetimes. But that is equally wrong.

And if we live as if Christ's eventual return is just something for a long time in the future we will tend to fit in with the world around us. We will value the things it values. We will love the things the world loves.

Don't live as if you know that the world will go on and on as it has this past age. Because you know that it won't. You simply have to look around you and see the signs that Jesus is coming back.

Every time you hear about an earthquake it tells you nothing about when Jesus is returning. But it should remind you that he IS returning. When the next war erupts in our world, probably in Syria, or when the US and Israel bomb Iran, that is not a sign that some obscure event in Revelation is being fulfilled. It is a reminder that the Day of the Lord is real. Next time there is a news broadcast about famine in sub-Saharan Africa or when another bank goes down the tubes you should not sell your house and await Christ's immediate visitation. But you should remember that the Day is coming.

There are no signs that tell us when he is coming – he will be like a thief in the night. But there is every sign that he is coming – like labour pains for a pregnant woman.

This morning some of us need to stop trying to read the signs to predict when Jesus will return. It's a futile exercise that distracts you from what really matters. Others of us need to start looking at those signs and realise they teach us that the return of Christ inevitable and could happen today.

Andrew Evans, 20th November 2011