

# THE END TIMES

*(Daniel 12.1-13 and Matthew 24.36-44)*

On 21st May in 2011, an American radio host told his listeners that the end of the world and Jesus' return would happen around teatime on that day. He even had the event shown as 'Judgement Day' on roadside billboards. When it did not happen, he announced a new date – 21st October 2011. He lost his job!

A guy called Chris McCann was at it too – his date was October 7th 2015 – and there have been others at it over the years.

I wonder what you made of our two readings this morning. Our Matthew reading was all doom and gloom. Disaster will come without warning – right in the middle of ordinary workaday life. Some will survive. Some will not. The Daniel reading also talks about THE END. It is actually the end in two senses – it is the end of the book of Daniel and it is about the end of time.

The Matthew passage has been variously interpreted. Is it about the second coming of Jesus? Is it about people needing to be ready for their death? Or is it about what was to happen in 70AD (or CE) when the Romans wrought havoc in Israel putting down a rebellion against their occupation of the land and completely destroying the Temple which was sacred to the Jews? But that's for another sermon and another time.

Last Sunday, Brian Settle told us that he likes and understands the stories from the book of Daniel – those about Daniel's arrival and subsequent high ranking in the government of Babylon, the bit about the fiery furnace and the episode of the lion's den.

He then said that he struggled to understand the rather mysterious end part of the book about Daniel's dreams and visions. They start in chapter 7 and run through to chapter 12 and today's Old Testament reading.

So it looks as if I have a difficult task. Daunted, I looked in my reference books under the word 'difficulty'. All I could find was this: *A smooth sea never made a skilful mariner.* So here goes.

Our passage from the book called 'Daniel' is the last chapter of the book and to understand it we need to think about when the book was written and why it was written.

We do not really know who 'Daniel' was. Some think the book is not strictly historical, nor are the various stories in it necessarily factual. The whole book is an allegory – a book written to convey a particular message through a story or series of stories.

Many think it was probably written between 100 and 200 BC when Israel was under the heel of a particularly vicious conquering king called Antiochus Epiphanes who desecrated the Temple in 167 BC. It was a tough time for Israel and its people needed something to uphold and encourage them.

The early part of the book looks back to about 500 or 600 BC as Paul told us last week and speaks of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who conquered Israel and took some of its people into captivity in Babylon, choosing some of the brightest of them to serve him – changing their names from Israelite ones to Babylonian ones to rub in the fact that they are his captives.

In the visions described in chapters seven to eleven (except for chapter 9 which is a long, moving, prayer of confession) what has he seen in his visions?

- Four great beasts, a big horn and a small horn along with the Ancient of Days who has an everlasting kingdom.
- A ram, a huge goat and something called the Holy One.
- On the bank of the river Tigris he meets a man of very striking and glorious appearance.
- The kings of the south and the north.

All of these visions are about suffering in one way or another but also about the end of suffering and the vindication of the faithful and good.

Let's go back to the context in which the book of Daniel was written. The nation of Israel, you will remember, was under the heel of a cruel foreign king who did everything he could to persecute the Israeli people and their worship of the God who had rescued them from their Egyptian slavery and given them a land of their own.

They desperately needed something to give them hope of the end of that persecution and give them back their nation and their ability to worship their God in freedom. I mentioned Daniel's prayer. It's in chapter 9. The last part of it gives a flavour of the situation:

*Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes to the desolation of the city that bears your name. We do not make request of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your name.*

Four strange visions and a passionate prayer: and now, in our reading, we come to the end of the book and, perhaps, a glimpse (but only a far-off glimpse) of the New Testament concept of life after death. We read in verse 2: *'Multitudes of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt'*

But before that, in verse 1 Daniel is told: *There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.*

So we get a picture of conflict and tribulation, coupled with a confident expression of hope in God's final triumph – an idea moving towards the New Testament teaching about Jesus' resurrection opening the gate to eternal life for those who accept and follow Him.

In every age and, of course, in our age, when people stand up for Jesus and his teaching they run the risk of opposition – sometimes very violent opposition. The persecution of Christians in many parts of the world verges on the indescribable. But, as one of the commentators puts it – in words far more eloquent than mine:

*That can hardly come as a surprise, for the story of the Gospel is that strength comes though weakness, victory comes through defeat, resurrection comes though crucifixion.*

We have sung Martin Luther's hymn *A safe stronghold our God is still*. The words are from the 16th century but their meaning is clear.

Before we move on to look at Daniel's timescales – 1,290 days and 1,335 days – we must go back to verse 2 of our reading: *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to everlasting shame and contempt*. Leslie Newbiggin, a noted Methodist preacher said this:

*Nothing could exceed the gravity and the solemnity of the warnings about this which are given in the teachings of Jesus and Paul. All the strands of tradition which are woven together in the New Testament bear witness to this.*

But he also said: *The question of eternal salvation and judgement is not for speculation about the fate of other people; it is an infinitely serious practical question addressed to me.*

The time references in our passage are, to say the least, puzzling. We have *a time, two times and half a time* and *1,290 days* and *1,395 days*. Perhaps it is to do with the context of the turbulent, oppressive, dangerous time in which the book was written.

What is clear is that Daniel was being told to be patient in waiting for God's purpose to come about in God's good time. He will be in control

and those who trust in Him – **we** who trust in Him – will share in the fulfilment of that purpose.

With that in mind, let's remind ourselves of some words of St. Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*

And with that assurance we close the book of Daniel.