

## I believe in...The Second Coming

Sunday, 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2011

Phil Yancey quote – Old Black people his wife met seemed to have more hope at the end of their lives than old White people. The reason is that life was so hard for them that they spent more time singing songs about, thinking about & longing for Jesus' Return & for Heaven.

If we hold onto the Truth about this, it gives us hope and changes us; it is so important for us to know that our day-to-day lives aren't all there is and that we learn to measure our lives by Eternity, rather than the difficulties we're going through.

I went to the dentist last year (I really don't like the dentist!) and as I was lying back in the chair, being worked on, I found my bad teeth reminding me that one Day, they will all be made new – there will be no more decay! (I'm not always that godly!)

As we go through life, and we maybe get ill, or carry grief or loss with us, or our lives seem to be a constant struggle or we have depression or regret or persecution, it is really important that we keep an eye on the fact that there is a Day when all of this will end, and we will be united with Jesus.

Remember what the angel said at the Ascension:

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? **This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.**" (Acts 1:10-11)

On my computer's calendar you can scroll forward through the months or years. There is a date on that calendar that will be The Day when Jesus returns, and every eye will see Him, and there will be a loud Trumpet sounded and then He will judge the living and the dead and then He will bring His People – His Church from all nations – His Bride, to be with Him forever:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself

will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Revelation 21:3-4)

This is wonderful Truth, but sometimes we don't hold onto it as much as we could – and I think there is maybe a reason for this, that we have maybe come across people or books that have sensationalised it and have maybe got things out of balance.

I want to briefly talk about how some teaching on this has developed, and how that may have had a bad effect on the Church.

And then I want to look at what Jesus said about His Return.

In the 1880's a Brethren evangelist called J N Darby came up with a new 'theology' called Dispensationalism. It included a very detailed of the End Times, which was very different to anything that had been taught before in the history of Christianity.

Some of it was accurate and prophetic – for instance he prophesied about Israel becoming a geographical nation again. But other parts dug for hidden meaning for everything in the Bible (for instance, what the ten horns on the beast in Daniel 7 stood for) and came to largely depressing conclusions that everything would get worse, the Church would dwindle and lose most of its power and then, to save it from extinction, Jesus would 'rapture' the faithful remnant, who would vanish and meet Jesus in the air.

In 1970, an American writer called Hal Lindsey wrote a book called “The late, great planet Earth” which was based on Darby's teaching. It was a massive bestseller.

At the time it was written, there was a lot going on in the world – there was the Arab – Israeli war, the European Union was growing and becoming more powerful and the US and the Soviet Union were in the middle of the Cold War

And in this atmosphere, his book largely cast Russia and China and the Arab nations as the bad guys (with the 10 horns on the Beast being the 10 countries that were in the European Union at the time!) The Pope was a good contender for the Antichrist and the Good old US of A was going to be the good guys in the story!

He also hinted very strongly (although didn't say it outright, that it was almost a dead cert that Jesus would return sometime before the end of the 1980's.

In 1990, after Jesus hadn't returned as he predicted, there were 12 EU members, Communism had crumbled, and China were becoming trading partners, so the book was quietly taken out of print!

But it remained very influential, in that it had flavoured the thinking of the American Church and had also spread to be very influential in much of the Church in the UK.

Hal Lindsey revised things a bit and brought out other books that more or less said don't bother making any plans after the year 2000! He still carries a lot of influence.

Then, in 1996, the same theology reappeared in the phenomenally popular internationally bestselling "Left Behind" series of books (and films and video games!) by Tim LaHaye. (I haven't read these so don't want to comment too strongly)

Although these haven't ever claimed to be more than *fiction based on the Bible*, the truth is that these too have been hugely influential and have informed what many people – especially in the Western Church, believe.

Why is this all important?

We need to realise 3 things:

1. The theology underpinning this is not the main theology of the Church through the ages, nor is it the most widely held view today, and it is a view that tends to write the USA in as being the good guys, and other nations as being the enemy. Last time I checked, Jesus was being given all nations as His Inheritance!

2. The problem is that in sensationalising some things, making it all seem more like science-fiction than Truth, and making false claims or predictions that don't come to pass, is that it raises, then dashes our hopes and undermines what we believe, so we can back off from believing and holding onto it.
  
3. In some ways, it is a pessimistic view of the Church dwindling away to an impotent, almost apostate remnant; and in some ways it is an overly optimistic view of things – that Christians will be whisked away before things get really bad! So I don't believe it is theology that equips us to face the future well.

I would not normally be as critical in the way I preach, nor would I want to criticise individuals, but if we are not careful, we can swallow this one, minority interpretation of the Bible, rather than looking into the Bible for ourselves.

And that's exactly what I want us to do now – I want us to look at what Jesus said and what we *can* be sure of.

(Show Jerusalem slide)

What is going on here – in Matthew 24, is that Jesus and His disciples had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem, which at the time was one of the biggest and grandest buildings anywhere in the world. Parts of it were covered in gold, and so as you walked up towards Jerusalem and the Temple, it must have been an overwhelming sight – especially for some fishermen from the North!

Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, “As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.” (Luke 20:5-6)

Then Matthew carries on the account:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Luke adds the detail that Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies (Luke 21:20). This was literally fulfilled on 10<sup>th</sup> August, 70AD when Jerusalem fell to the Roman general (later emperor) Titus. After 4 years of revolt the Romans surrounded Jerusalem with 3 legions (armies) and when they conquered, they burned the Temple. The fire caused all the gold on it to melt and the Roman soldiers, as they were looting the Temple, literally prised the stones apart to get at the gold.

A victory arch was made to commemorate this in Rome and shows the Roman soldiers carrying off the sacred items from the Temple (see picture)

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?”

These are 2 different questions, which the disciples asked together, because they were assuming that both things would happen together, probably in their lifetime.

Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be

equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

"Immediately after the distress of those days

    "the sun will be darkened,  
    and the moon will not give its light;  
the stars will fall from the sky,  
    and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time

of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. (Matthew 24:1-44)

This is a difficult passage to read, because of its subject matter of coming persecution.

It is also a hard passage to understand because, as I said earlier, the Disciples asked 2 questions –

1. When will this happen (ie. the destruction of the Temple)
2. What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? (Matt 24:3)

Jesus answers both questions, but doesn't say "This is the answer to the first one, and this is the answer to the second"

And actually, He goes backwards and forwards between the two questions.

Part of the confusion about the passage is about working out which things relate to the Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 70AD, and which ones are about the Signs of Jesus' Coming and the End of the Age.

It's my belief that a lot of this passage relates to 70AD; namely:

- Jerusalem being surrounded by armies
- All the stones in the Temple being cast down
- Those in Judea fleeing to the hills
- Praying for it not to happen in the winter (it didn't – it was in August)
- The abomination that causes desolation standing in the Holy Place (a reference to the prophecy in Daniel, fulfilled by the Gentile Roman soldiers entering the Temple, and possibly the worship of Caesar there)
- The faith of many growing cold
- And possibly the Gospel going to the Nations (the Gentiles) although elsewhere we are clearly called to take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth.
- So "This generation will not pass away until these things happen" (v.34)

But as well as the parts that happened in 70AD, Jesus also talked about the “beginning of birth pains” (v.8) which are difficult things to be endured, which need to happen before the End, but point to the Joy that is to follow.

These include:

- False christs
- Wars and rumours of wars
- Nation rising against nation
- Famines
- Earthquakes
- Signs in the heavens

These are things that we might experience, and indeed do, every day in the news. They don't mean in themselves that Jesus is about to return, but they should remind us that Jesus' Return is coming.

When Louise was in labour, our ante-natal classes had taught us to say that with every birth pain, the birth was closer; I'm not sure how much Louise appreciated me reminding her of this as she had the pains!

As we watch the news though, and this year alone we have seen severe earthquakes in New Zealand, Japan and Spain, and have seen wars and uprisings throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as having compassion and giving and praying and campaigning for peace, we should be encouraged that Jesus is coming! And we should know that one day all these wars and famines and troubles will cease.

Jesus said that we are to be people who keep watching for His Coming and recognising the Signs:

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. (v.32-33)

Elsewhere He used the example of the weather:

He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and

overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. (Matthew 16:2-3)

So what other Signs should we watch for?

- “As it was in the Day of Noah” (v.37) People living as if nothing will happen.
- And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (v.14)

Jesus also said that He would return “like a thief in the night” – in other words, when we’re not expecting Him.

So we should be actively involved in World Mission – especially to unreached People Groups, which is why we sent the “the C’s” to an unreached city and why the work John W is doing on translating the Bible into a language that doesn’t have it is so important.

The hope of and longing for Jesus’ Return should motivate us to send, give and go – in order to speed His Return.

But we shouldn’t just sit back and think “He isn’t coming yet because there are still unreached People Groups” Wayne Grudem says that we must at least see the possibility that on the Day of Pentecost this job was done – Acts 2:5 says this:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. (Acts 2:5)

Or if not then, either through Mission we don’t know about or by God’s Sovereign Work, the Great Commission may have been fulfilled.

If we don’t at least think this is possible, then we’re not doing what Jesus told us to in living ready so we won’t be surprised when He comes.

So what Jesus tells us is that we should live as if He could return now!

But while we’re ‘waiting ready’ we should be getting on with our lives now to the glory of God.

The Thessalonians got so excited about Jesus' imminent return that they gave up their jobs, expecting that they wouldn't need them for much longer, so Paul addressed this in his Letters. (1 Thessalonians 4&5, 2 Thessalonians 3)

If some of what I have said is more confusing than helpful, I want you to remember this – Jesus is coming, and in Revelation 22 – the last chapter in the Bible, He says He is coming soon!

And this Truth should encourage us through hard times and stop us getting too caught up and entangled in this world.

Hebrews 10 says this:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—**and all the more as you see the Day approaching**. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Let's be people who have our eyes so fixed on this Day that nothing robs us of this hope – even in the darkest times, and nothing causes us to swerve away.

Because there are times ahead when the Church may go through trials – Jesus has forewarned us; and we need this Truth to hold onto.

Early Christians used to greet one another by saying “Maranatha” – Even so, Come! (1 Corinthians 16:22) – literally it means “Come soon Jesus; He is coming!”

Sing “Great is the darkness”