

Wars and Rumours of Wars

Hespeler, 14 November 2021 © Scott McAndless

Daniel 12:1-3, Psalm 16, Hebrews 10:11-25, [Mark 13:1-8](#)

I was in a discussion recently about the passage we read this morning – the passage where Jesus starts talking about all of these things that are going to happen. Much of what Jesus says in this part of the Gospel of Mark, after all, took place within about forty years of him saying it. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and one stone was hardly left on top of another. The rest of the city of Jerusalem did not come off much better.

How did Jesus Know?

So, I was talking about Jesus saying all of this with someone and the question that came up was how did Jesus know that all of this was going to happen. Yes, I know that it is a given in the Christian church and according to our doctrine that Jesus was not *just* an ordinary person – that had a unique nature and the ability to see things that others cannot. And surely Jesus could have made use of such supernatural power to see events that would happen 40 years after his crucifixion.

But the question was whether Jesus really *needed* such powers to predict the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple. My idea was that no, he didn't. All he needed was an analytic mind. All he needed to do was look at the situation on the ground right at that moment – to see the tension between the Jews and the Roman occupying forces and the insurrectionists who were starting to organize – in order to see that this was all going to boil over sooner or later. And, when it did boil over, there was absolutely no question who was going to win and who was going to lose. There was no way that Jerusalem could possibly hold out against the Romans!

His Prediction about War

So yeah, there really was a lot about what Jesus was saying that any smart person could have seen coming. And that certainly seems to be as true for what Jesus says about war too. **“When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.”** Because, if you want to make a prediction that know will come true, that has got to be one of the safest. In any era, any century, any decade in the history of humanity, if you say, “there will be wars and rumours of wars, and nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom,” people will be amazed at your perfect prescience about the future.

So, when Jesus predicts wars, he is definitely on safe ground. But I am particularly intrigued by what he says about war. Because Jesus actually seems to be giving a warning about our attitude towards war. He warns us not to make too much of it.



He says, **“Do not be alarmed,”** when you see such things. And then later he adds, **“This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”** This is rather surprising when you think of it. When there is a war, and especially when you are caught up in the middle of one, the experience seems to absorb almost everything. The war and what happens and who wins and who loses seem to mean absolutely everything.

Branding World War I

This is especially true when you think about how wars are branded and how they are sold to the people who will fight in them. There you see very clearly that we don't see war as **“but the beginning of the birth pangs,”** but rather as the one huge event that is supposed to fix everything.

Think, for example, of the war that we call World War I. Is that what it was called at the time, the first in a series of global conflagrations? Of course not! Nor was it called the war that was kind of inevitable once the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria had been assassinated setting a chain of events in motion that led to Germany invading Belgium which triggered a bunch of alliances that obliged everybody to declare war against everybody else. Did they call it that? No. What did they call it? They called it **“The War to End all Wars.”**

It was, in other words, a war that was supposed to solve everything. Brave young lads from so many countries around the world were persuaded to put their lives on the line and fight for the most noble goal of making sure that there would never be any more wars ever.

And here is a spoiler alert for you (just in case you don't know how that particular war turned out): it didn't work. World War I was not the last war ever. In fact, in many ways, the way it ended and the treaty that the nations signed carried within it the seeds of the next great global conflagration. That war was sold as being the great solution to everything. It was a promise that was big and bold and beautiful that the world would be changed for the good. It was very much like the biblical promise of an end times that the disciples were asking Jesus about that day. That's how we like to talk about war, but Jesus is telling us that it is a mistake to expect such things from war.

Branding Other Wars

That is not just true of the First World War either. Think of the other great conflagrations of our lifetimes and how successful they were at accomplishing the grand goals that they promised. It is true that the Second World War did succeed in its goal of putting an end to the truly evil and frightening fascism that had come to power in Germany, Italy and Japan, but that war seems to be, in some ways, a bit of an exception. I would also note, looking around me today, that it doesn't seem as if the threat of fascism has disappeared from the face of the Earth entirely.

But think of the other conflicts that have taken place. A war fought in Korea and another in Vietnam had the very clear goal of stopping the dominoes of Communism from falling across Asia. They certainly didn't stop the dominoes from falling in those countries anyways. And remember when the Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and there were people proclaiming that, because we had won that conflict, it was the end of history – nothing else of any significance would ever happen. How did that turn out?

And I hardly dare mention the noble goals that took us into Afghanistan. Not only were we going to destroy the Taliban and all that they stood for, but we were going to be part of planting a vibrant and free democracy in the middle of the Near Eastern world. And that was supposed to be a real game-changer. I think we are all aware of how horribly that turned out, especially for the people of Afghanistan.

War may be Inevitable

I don't think that Jesus was saying that there is no place for war. On the contrary, Jesus was saying that it is often inevitable. Try as you might, and we need to try as hard as we possibly can, we will find that it is simply unavoidable sometimes. And when it is inevitable, we are greatly blessed by and eternally indebted to those who step forward and put their lives on the line to fight and to protect. And they may even be persuaded to do that because they believe everything that they are being promised that is going to accomplish – they go to end all wars or to set up a beacon of democracy in the Middle East.

But it won't Solve Everything

But here is where Jesus' caution may be helpful to us. For example, one of the things that has made the end of the war in Afghanistan so distressing was just the thought of all of the blood and the lives and the broken bodies that were spent for the goal of creating a free and democratic society in that country. You can certainly understand the bitterness of those who gave so much to accomplish such things there to see an end result that basically just returned that is no better than what the country was before and so much worse in many ways. But I think that Jesus may be telling us that we should not have been expecting so much from wars in the first place. They are **“but the beginning of the birth pangs”** after all.

What Will?

But I guess the really important question we need to ask is, if war isn't going to do it, what will bring about the birth of a better world? There are no easy answers to that question, of course, though I think if we can get past the idea of solving all of our problems by having nation rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, we will likely be further down the road to a better world.

What this whole chapter in the Gospel of Mark is saying, of course, is that *God* is committed to the creation of a renewed and better world, particularly symbolized by the **“the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.”** (v. 26) In some ways, therefore, our task seems to be to wait for God to bring it about. But I think we should be careful not to confuse this call to wait with any sense that there is nothing for us to do or that we have no role to play in the vision that God has for that better world.

Very Active Waiting

No, when Jesus says wait, he has something very active in mind. **“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”** (vv. 32,33) So we are to be alert which doesn't just mean that we are watching but that we are ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. But

that raises the question, what sort of action are we supposed to be ready to spring into? Because I don't think, based on what Jesus says about war and how it doesn't actually resolve everything, that we are supposed to be constantly ready to fight and use violence to achieve even the most noble of goals.

The idea seems to be this. God is committed to this world – committed to saving it, committed to renewing it. But that doesn't mean that God wants to do it all alone. In infinite graciousness, God has decided to give us the opportunity to be coworkers in this great task. That means that God will offer to each one of us, things to do, ways to help. God will give to one over here the opportunity to act as a peacemaker. God will give to another over there the chance to stand up and peacefully oppose some great injustice. Another, perhaps with just some small act of kindness or mercy, will advance the program. We may never know in advance where our part to play may be, that is why being constantly prepared is so important.

Halverson's Blessing

There was once a preacher named Richard Halverson who understood this perhaps better than anybody else. He used to end each worship service by making the following promise to the people of his congregation. *"You go nowhere by accident,"* he would say. *"Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there. God has a purpose in your being right where you are. Christ, who indwells you by the power of his Spirit, wants to do something in and through you. Believe this and go in his grace, his love, his power. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."*

That, more than anything, captures the sense of waiting and being prepared that Jesus was really talking about. It is indeed a sense of living in constant expectation that God is about to inaugurate God's kingdom. But it is not brought about by nation rising up against nation or kingdom against kingdom. It is not always going to come in a great light shining from one end of the sky to the other. Most of us will realize it by being quietly prepared to spring into action whenever God lays before us an opportunity to live out the kingdom of God before our friends and neighbours and the whole world.