

Are We Living in the Last Days?

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 26th Sunday after Pentecost, November 16, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Malachi 4:1-6; Psalm 82; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are we living in the last days? Let me state categorically and without any equivocation, as dogmatically and as emphatically as possible that, yes, we *are* living in the last days. Next Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, is the last Sunday in the Church Year. In just two weeks the new Church year will begin on the first Sunday of Advent. We're living in the last days of the Church Year. It's, therefore, appropriate that the theme of all of our Scripture lessons is the Last Days. The *prophet Malachi* tells the people of the coming day of God which will bring judgment to evildoers and blessings to the righteous. The *Psalms* which we sang concludes with an invocation to God to judge the earth. In our *Epistle lesson* Paul is writing to Christians who believed so strongly that they were living in the last days that they quit their work and lived in idleness, simply waiting for the end. And in our *Gospel lesson* Jesus speaks about the signs that will accompany the end. Although parts of this chapter are very difficult to understand Jesus clearly tells his disciples what we can expect *before* the End finally comes; what Jesus expects of us; and what He promises.

I. What can we expect before the End comes?

We can expect false messiahs, Jesus warns. "Take heed that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name saying, 'I'm the one.'" Human nature longs for Messiahs. We long for a Napoleon, a Hitler, a Mussolini, a Jim Jones, or an Ayatollah Khomeini. We long for someone to come and say, "I'm the One who can save you." Sometimes entire nations

take on messianic pretensions and we confuse national self interest with the Kingdom of God. Our great danger as Christians is that we'll begin to follow other Messiahs and Lords rather than the One who was Crucified and rose again from the dead.

We can expect false prophets. Many will come in Christ's name saying, "The time is at hand." Prophets, scientists, astrologers, even ~~theologians~~ ^{Preachers} speaking in the name of Christ, have predicted the end of the world throughout history in times of war, natural disasters, and strange astronomical phenomena like comets. When the ^{Jerusalem} Temple was destroyed in AD 70, when Rome fell to the barbarians in AD 476, and as the year AD 1000 approached, and every time Haley's Comet came around, people were saying in Christ's name, "The time is at hand." Don't listen to them. Don't be led astray. The great danger of every generation is to confuse historic crises in history with the final crisis of history. Anyone who declares the End to be imminent is a fraud.

We can also expect persecution and martyrdom. "They will lay hands on you and persecute you and some of you will be put to death." Christians confess Jesus to be Lord over every area of life; not only the religious, but the political, the economic, and the social. Whenever and wherever Christians bring the authority of Christ to bear in a situation they are liable to be persecuted and even martyred. All of us are familiar with highly publicised cases of persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union. But persecution and martyrdom takes place all over the world. Just a few years ago, Archbishop Oscar Romero, was martyred in El Salvador because he bravely took his stand with Christ in his outspoken support of the poor and oppressed of his country. Even in our own nation many of us can remember how Dr. Martin Luther King was harrassed by the

FBI and jailed by the authorities because he dared to believe that "all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." We, Americans, need to be reminded that Jesus said that we should expect to be persecuted before the End comes. Of course we aren't to invite persecution by arrogance and narrowmindedness. But could it be that we Americans don't suffer more persecution because we've compromised our faith in Jesus as Lord and relegated our faith to the purely private and spiritual realm?

11. What does Jesus expect of us before the end comes? "This will be a time to bear testimony", he says. Until the end comes Jesus expects us to be a faithful witness to his Lordship in every area of life. He says that Christians will find themselves living in a violent world of wars and natural disasters. We'll find ourselves in prisons and standing before kings and governors. And Jesus says that we are to use all these circumstances as opportunities to bear testimony."

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In ~~a world~~ of war He expects us to be a witness to the Gospel of peace. When Jesus said that wars and tumults must first take place he didn't mean that it's futile to work for peace. The very reality of war, Jesus says, gives the Christian the opportunity to witness for peace. Peacemaking is the Believer's calling. That task will never be completed, but in a world of wars and tumults Christians, of all people, must work for peace and bear witness to the Prince of Peace.

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In ~~the face of the~~ natural disasters Jesus expects us to bear witness to his compassion. In 1976 an earthquake rocked Guatemala, destroying buildings and killing people. The Eastminster United Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas was into a half-million dollar building campaign when news of the disaster came. Instead of going

forward with the addition to its church, the Eastminster congregation voted to scale the project down to \$180,000. Then the people agreed to give \$120,000 to help their distressed brothers and sisters in Guatemala. Christians are not supposed to throw their hands up in despair in the face of disasters. In times of earthquakes, famines, and pestilence Jesus expects us to bear witness to his compassion.

Jesus expects us to bear witness in prisons. I recently read the story of two prisoners. Liam, a 26-year old Catholic, was imprisoned for IRA terrorist activities. While in prison he participated in a series of IRA prison strikes which culminated in the 1981 hunger strikes that claimed the lives of 10 IRA inmates. After 55 days on the hunger strike and in a coma, Liam was hours away from becoming the eleventh prisoner to die when his mother ordered that he be fed intravenously. While recuperating from the strike, he renewed a former interest in Christianity and started reading the Bible. ^{Through The witness of Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship,} Understanding from the Scriptures that he "cannot serve two masters," he realized that he had to choose between the violent ways of the IRA and the Way of Jesus. He chose Jesus. Soon after renewing the faith into which he had been baptized, Liam took the brave step of leaving the Catholic dinner tables and walking over to eat with Protestant inmates. He felt the love of God demanded this. He met Jimmy, a Protestant loyalist and sympathizer with the Ulster Defense League. Jimmy and Liam began studying the Bible together with other Christian prisoners, and Jimmy renewed the faith into which he had been baptized. Because Christians bore witness, ~~even~~ in prison, Jimmy and Liam are now reconciled in Christ.

Jesus expects us to bear witness even before Kings and Governors. Last July 20th the Revd. Allan Boesak, a pastor in the South

African Reformed church, was leading a worship service in remembrance of people his government has detained. As he spoke to the congregation he saw police cars arriving outside. They jumped out, surrounded the church and stationed themselves at the entrance. Some came into the church led by their captain. The captain walked up the center aisle and came to the pulpit. He demanded that pastor Boesak stop preaching. Boesak boldly responded, "I will not stop preaching. You sit down and listen to the word of God."

He went on to bear witness, "I am a minister of the gospel. No policeman and no government official, no matter what his rank, has the right to come into our church service, disrupt the service and demand that I stop preaching. I will not stop preaching. I am in the church preaching ~~the word of God at the command of the Almighty God. No human being will~~ stop me from doing that. If you want to stop me from preaching in the church of Jesus Christ, you will have to arrest me or you will have to kill me."

Friends, around the world today, behind the iron curtain, in Central America, in Korea, even in the towns and cities of our own nation, there are men and women who are standing before those in authority and bearing faithful witness to Christ as Lord. Let us pray for them and ask God to give us grace to speak boldly for the Lordship of Christ.

III. What does Jesus promises to those who bear faithful witness and endure to the end? *He promises to give us wisdom in what we say which none of our adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict and He promises, "Not a hair of your head will perish."*

"Yes, some of you may be killed", Jesus says, "but not a hair of your

head will perish." The Apostle Paul relied on that promise when he wrote, "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." "The one who walks with Christ may lose his life but he can never lose his soul (Barclay)."

And now, to summarise, when Jesus speaks about the end of the world he tells us that until the very end we can expect false prophets and false messiahs who try to lead us away from the Crucified and Risen Lord. He tells us we can expect persecution and even martyrdom to the very end. He tells us that he expects us to bear witness to Christ as Lord to the very end. ~~And he promises to protect us and give us wisdom to the very end.~~

And so we come again to our opening question. "Are we living in the last days?" Jesus tells us that that's not really a question that needs to concern us. What we really need to be concerned about is not when the End will come but that we endure and be faithful^{to} Christ as Lord to the very End.

Let us pray: Almighty God, give us grace to endure as faithful followers of Christ the Lord; to bear witness to his Sovereignty over all of life and in every situation; so that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.