

“From the Fig Tree Learn its Lesson”

In the name of him who is coming in glory to judge the earth, dear friends in Christ: In order to keep my finger on the movements and trends in the wider world of Christianity, I do a lot of reading and listening to Christian radio. And based on this I can tell you that by far the most popular topic that's on the minds of American Evangelicals are those issues that pertain to the end times: things like Christ's return on the Last Day, the resurrection the dead, the final judgment, eternal life in heaven or eternal damnation in hell, and the biggest question that's on everyone's mind, when is it going to happen?

I'm sure that you're aware that there has never been a shortage of self-proclaimed prophets and Bible teachers who think they have the answer to that last question. Thirteen years ago, when we approaching turn of the millennium, they were saying that the Y2K bug was going cause the collapse of world order, and that would be the prelude to Christ's return. Last year it was the undeservedly popular and widely believed Harold Camping, who gave dates for the end of this age first in April and then when that failed, in October. Amazingly, when the world kept on going after his deadlines passed, he insisted that he wasn't wrong – his calculations were absolutely right. The problem was that the Lord changed his mind (and apparently didn't bother to tell him).

This year it's the Mayan Calendar that they're clamoring about. It runs out in a little less than a month on December 21st. Right before Christmas. The kids are going to hate that. But I don't know what makes some present day Christians think that the ancient Mayans, a pagan people who practiced ritual human sacrifice and cannibalism, knew the details of a date that Jesus himself said he didn't know. And I've got news for you: the calendar *we use* runs out on December 31st. And when it does, we start over. The next day is January 1st. The Mayans did the same thing. Whenever their calendar ran out (and it has before), they simply started over. The only difference is that they use a much longer cycle.

For a while I had a pretty good system in place, not to calculate the date of end of time; but rather to ensure at least that it wasn't going to happen the very next day. You see, for several years my brother was stationed in Japan, which is on the other side of the international dateline. Most of the time, it's tomorrow there already. So, if I wanted to know if the world was going to end the next day, I could call him. If he was still there, the answer was no. And if that sounds silly, trust me: it makes as much or better sense than the methods used by all the others who have tried (and failed) to determine when the end would come.

But it's better that we not listen to these people who imagine that they've determined the date of Christ's return. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us all we need to know about it. The section we heard is a continuation of a discourse we began last week. One of the disciples commented to Jesus about the imposing buildings that made up the Temple complex in Jerusalem, and how they seemed so solid and sturdy that they'd last forever. To the disciples' horror, Jesus told them no, the grand structures were all destined to be destroyed, along with the rest of the city of Jerusalem. And later, sitting together on the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked Jesus to tell them more about this. They wanted to know when the destruction of the city would come, and what warning signs would lead up to it so that they would know for sure it was about to take place.

The answer Jesus gave them was a whole lot more than they bargained for. And it's necessary for us to understand that his response to their questions operates on two different levels. On the surface level, Jesus speaks of the events that the disciples themselves will experience prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. He tells them that there will be wars, famines, and earthquakes in various places. He says that false prophets will arise and lead many astray. He also tells them that they will be persecuted for bearing witness of him, and that some of them will be put to death. And all these things did indeed happen prior to AD 70 when Roman armies laid waste to Jerusalem and leveled the city to the ground, just as Jesus had said. It was the end of the Jewish nation; and again, on the surface level, that's what Jesus is talking about, which was the immediate concern of the disciples.

But on a second deeper level, Jesus is also talking about the end of the age. The end of Jerusalem and with it the Jewish nation (which would take place in the near future) would be a prophetic foreshadowing of the end of the world. Just as Jerusalem was completely destroyed, so also one day the entire earth will be laid waste – and then will come the judgment. And the same signs that preceded the first event will also precede the second. There will be wars and famines and earthquakes all over the place. Deceiving prophets will arise and poison the minds of many with their aberrant teachings. The Gospel will be preached in the entire world. And Christians will be persecuted and killed for bearing Christ's name. And when all this is happening, the end will come suddenly. The sun will dim, the moon will turn as red as blood, and the gavel of God's judgment will come down one final time. Christ will appear visibly to all people—even to the dead who will be raised at his coming. And he will send his angels to gather his own at his right hand; that is, all those who trusted in him and looked forward in hope to his glorious reappearing.

And with this in mind, Jesus tells his disciples – and us – to learn a lesson from the fig tree. “As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that *he* is near—at the very gates.”

Jesus doesn't tell us when; but he does tell us what signs to look for: wars, fears of coming wars, nations opposing nations, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, and persecutions of the faithful. And if it sounds like the headlines of just about every major newspaper or a summary of the evening news on just about any day of the week, that's the point. All of these things are like the branch of a tree in the spring beginning to bud and send out leaves. Just as the tree tells you it's almost summer, so also these events tell you that Christ's return is imminent. They are reminders that the Judge is at the gate. And they are telling you that you had better be ready to receive him; not tomorrow, not next week, not some time in the distant future, but right now.

But maybe you're thinking, “What good are signs that are constantly being fulfilled? If all these signs had already taken place in the days of the disciples, and have reappeared again and again in every generation since then, how are they helping me at all? I still don't know when Christ is going to return.”

That's true. You don't know when. But the signs aren't supposed to tell you *when*. They're supposed to tell you to *be ready*. Each time another sign appears it's a reminder that the end may come at any moment, so be prepared. More than that, each sign carries other reminders for the faithful. Wars and conflicts between nations remind us that this world of people is sick with sin—that's our problem. We long for a golden age of peace. Philosophers dream and write about it. Rulers and statesmen have tried to create it. But it never happens. It

always eludes our grasp. It's because sinful mankind can never produce a true and lasting peace. We will always mess it up with our selfishness, pride, envy, and lusts. Only the Lord can establish peace. And he has through Jesus Christ. He's the one who defeated sin and its curse for us. And so it's to him that we must look to for the peace that the world cannot give.

Famines remind us that the world itself is under the curse. Created to be humankind's servant to sustain and feed us, now it always comes up short. The world itself is broken because of our sin, and now it will always fail to satisfy our appetites – not just of food, but everything: clean water, clean air, arable land, suitable housing, the minerals and other resources we want and need ... there's never enough of something. So if it's security and satisfaction we're after, we won't find it in the world. And that reminds us to keep our focus on him who does supply all our needs: the Lord Jesus Christ, who starts with what's most important for us; namely the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of everlasting life. He tells us to keep our priorities straight: "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well."

Earthquakes remind us that this sin-cursed world is passing away. Each seismic jolt is a contraction in the painful labor the world is undergoing as it waits in eager anticipation for the sons of God to be revealed. That earthquakes also bring down mighty cities and even the most carefully constructed fabrications of men reminds us that all our achievements will come to nothing. The only work that ultimately matters is that which is founded upon Christ and the work he accomplished for us on the cross.

The certainty that false prophets will arise reminds us that we have to know and teach the truth. To remain steadfast, we must be so thoroughly grounded in Christ and his true doctrines and united in fellowship with his Church that we cannot be led astray. Only if we know the whole truth, and keep feeding our faith through the ministry of the Church's Word and Sacraments, will we be able recognize the wolves who come to us in sheep's clothing, and be able to warn others to keep them from being caught unaware and devoured.

That the Gospel must be preached in all the world reminds us of our responsibility to tell others the good news in order to snatch them also from the fire. It's also what urges us to support missions at home and abroad, and to pray for growth of the Church throughout the globe.

That Christians are being persecuted reminds us that the devil and the world are still very much the enemies of the Gospel. They are actively seeking to destroy us. Even more, they seek to use fear to silence us or to get us to deny the truth. It also reminds us to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering for their faith, and to do what we can to defend them. And finally, it reminds us that we too need to be prepared to suffer persecution and if necessary death rather deny Christ our Lord.

So it would seem that this fig tree Jesus speaks of is loaded with lessons and reminders for us. They don't tell us when; but they do tell us to remain ready at all times. And I have to add that it's a mercy that we don't know the precise date of Christ's return. Just imagine what would have happened if Jesus had told his disciples, "Listen up, fellas: I tell you now that I will return in judgment in the year 2013." What would have happened? Do you suppose they would have had the same sense of urgency to get the word of the Gospel out? Do you think they would have risked life and limb in the process? And when facing persecution, would they have boldly confessed the truth, or would they have backed down, promising to repent of their weak confession later? You see, there would have been no urgency, no need to be faithful now, no

need to defend the truth from error. And so there wouldn't be a faithful Church today. It would have died with the disciples or in the next generation of Christians. Not knowing the date of Christ's return, and believing it to be imminent is part of what's kept the Church and its truth alive for the past 2000 years.

And more than that, for the past 2000 years the end has been coming for the faithful and the unfaithful alike. Each time someone dies, they come face to face with the Judge. The moment they leave this life, their eternal destiny is sealed for better or for worse. So if someone dies in the faith, they did so precisely because they were prepared for Christ's imminent return.

And that's why we too need to learn the lesson of the fig tree. The signs are all around us. The buds of the branch are swollen to the point of bursting. They're telling us to be ready. We don't want to be caught unprepared or sleeping spiritually, telling ourselves, "I'll take care of my soul's situation later", or "I'll repent of this ongoing sin later", or "I'll be more faithful later", or "I'll share the Gospel with my friend later." Later may never come. You need to be ready now.

That's the lesson of the fig tree. Christ our Lord tells us to learn it. And as we do, he's promised to be with us to uphold us, to feed our faith with his Word and Sacraments, to strengthen and equip us with his Spirit, and to unite us with him and one another in his steadfast love. We have his Word on it. He will keep us to the *end* either of this life or of this age when he comes again in glory. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!