



November 14

THE NEW SHOFAR

The glittering baubles of the world will pass away

Our focus needs to be on what will endure forever

know that He is near, at the gates – truly?

This chapter of Mark's Gospel can be confusing and has led to all kinds of weird and wonderful interpretations about the end of the world. As is so often the case, what some people would like to read into the text is probably not what Mark was saying. He is a very practical, down to earth shepherd of the flock Jesus had entrusted to his care. He was responsible for ensuring the faithful Christians kept their eyes on their mission, their God-given vocation of witnessing to the world the Good News of the love and mercy of God. What he was not doing was making a prophesy of the End.

in those days...

Mark's Church was facing tough times. Christians had been excluded from the synagogues and were beginning to endure times of persecution. It was not just difficult to remain faithful to their callings to follow Christ, it was becoming downright dangerous. He wrote at the time of the Jewish-Roman wars, uprisings that would eventually lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

What then would their pastor/shepherd want to say to them? He wants them to be filled with hope, to be looking forward to the future in anticipation of divine blessings. His message would need to be positive and this he has done. The key today is on the reassurance offered by Jesus: no matter how bad things might become, or seem, *my words will not pass away*. Jesus is not leaving the small band of Christians to face these difficult times on their own. Those who persevere in faithfulness, who live and maintain a Kingdom way of life, will find peace and joy in all things, even when it might seem that the entire universe is falling down upon them. Hope endures.

My words?

What are *my words*? The "words" of Jesus are all of the things he did, taught and proclaimed. In Hebrew, there is no clear distinction between a word and a deed. The same word is used for both. Thus, we are not being encouraged to dig-in for a long battle of attrition against a world that hates us. No. We are being encouraged to maintain an outlook of hope and to collaborate with the Lord Christ as He continues God's works of salvation. No matter how terrible things might appear to be all around us; no matter how strong the opposition we face; no matter how small, how weak, how powerless we might feel we are, it is the promises of Jesus to which we must look...*the*

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gates of Hell will not prevail against you...I will be with you always. Those words will endure through all things. Instead of focussing on the problems and the difficulties, our minds and our eyes are to turn to Jesus who is alongside of us. It is by “keeping on keeping on” that the power of the Kingdom spreads.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

What a cultural challenge this offers! Already newspapers and commentators are talking about the anticipated big spend for Christmas. We are encouraged to spend our way out of the economic malaise that has come from Covid. Tinsel on Christmas trees, coloured lights and presents are all we are offered. And into this world comes the Christian message from Jesus – *Heaven and earth will pass away!* This is the powerful declaration to our secular and material world.

The God who created the universe will bring that same universe to an end. It will not continue forever and ever. It is finite. We too are destined to face the same fate. We will one day *pass away*. Some sooner. Some later. Given that reality, says Jesus, where should we be focusing our attention? The resurrection of the Christ and the promise *where I have gone you too will follow* reassures us that our *passing away* is not the End. It is a change in the way we will live. It is this reality that enlivens our focus while we are on this earth.

What is the point of pursuing a world of tinsel and bright lights, when it will all fade away? Those things do nothing to make the world better and will not enable us to stand firm in the face of whatever life throws at us. They cannot save us from our weaknesses, our limitations and the power of those people and things that want to harm us in any way. Their allure comes and just as quickly it goes.

Give us something to hang onto say the apostles

The disciples started all this teaching when they asked for a sign (v. 4). He gave them the sign of the fig tree. Most of the trees in that part of the world are evergreen, but the olive and the fig are deciduous. The popular olive tree blossoms early. This is important because it means it is not a trustworthy sign of summer. The fig tree, however, blossoms late, so its blossoms promise that summer is just around the corner. If this scene takes place near Passover, as seems likely, Jesus could be pointing to a blossoming fig as he says these words. The flowers are visible, and they can put their money on the arrival of summer. The natural signs are clear. So it should be with the signs of the Kingdom.

The disciples were to apply the same way of thinking to the world around them. When they see the sky turning black and the cosmos coming apart (terrible and challenging times for us) we are to look deeper into those things and search for the saving hand of God. Divine salvation continues. God remains at work no matter what is happening. We might not be immediately aware of God’s presence, but as Mark reminds us, God is not only present there alongside of us, but is working to bring all things to the end He has planned for us. Their focus should not be on the Second Coming of Jesus. That will happen when God is ready. Our focus needs to be on responding to the Jesus already here with us.

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