

Matthew 24:3-14

[Reading Matthew 24:3-14]

There's one of those passages that we read and sometimes struggle to understand. But I just want to try and open it up a bit for you to get a clearer understanding of what Jesus is trying to say through those words.

A few years ago it was a very very orange sky over Britain and some of the newspapers made a big deal out of this: "Orange sky, what could that mean?" What it actually meant was: it was caused by smoke from forest fires in Portugal, and possibly also hurricane whipping up dust from the Sahara. So these things came together and caused the sky over large parts of Britain to go an orange colour. But it's interesting, isn't it, how things like that can happen and it can stir up like superstitious feelings: "Ooo, is this a terrible thing that is coming upon us now?" And that's been the way human beings have been ever since human beings first came about; we'd read things into such experiences.

A common view of Christians is that we love to be giving the idea of "the end of nigh". I went on a demonstration a few weeks ago and when we met in Parliament Square there was a man there, stand there just like this with a board on him, on both sides, saying: "The End is Nigh". (Not even the End is Near – the End is Nigh: God obviously still speaks I that old sort of language rather than having updated the way that he talks, certainly to that man, anyway.) It's a weird old thing that actually our 24 hours news cycle tends to bombard us with negative news all the while, and so it can cause us to feel as though the world is getting worse and worse and worse all the while. But the one thing the news isn't very interested in is when people are nice to each other – when good things happen – because that doesn't sell newspapers, it doesn't get people talking and tweeting on Twitter (I point blank refuse to go on Twitter any more – the only tweets I hear are the birds in the trees, because I can't be bothered with the other sort of tweets). It can cause us to be really negative. This picture here is of a man doing a survey with somebody: he's gone up to a door and the question he's asking of the person is "...and finally would you say your fear of crime has increased?" The person hasn't opened the door and you can see their eyes looking through the letterbox, so it's probably fair to say "Yes, their fear of crime has increased!"

But the reality is over the last 50 years all crime, including violent crime, has stayed at basically the same level, but our fear of crime has gone up over that time because we know so much more about the negative things that are happening. And so we have to filter – I don't know about you, but I have to filter how much of the news I watch – otherwise it can become something that starts to dominate the way you think, and the way that you feel. Over the years we might think that in some ways the last few decades have been incredibly damaging in terms of casualties of war, but if we go back to World War I it's estimated that between 17-20 million people died in that war; 17-20 million, in World War II it was over 60 million – 3% of the population of the world are estimated to have died in the Second World War. Now thank God that that hasn't happened to the same degree since. Although these wars were undoubtedly horrendous actually the world's population was so much bigger by the 20<sup>th</sup> century that even though that number of people died, you were still less likely to die as a soldier or as a civilian, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, than you were in any century previous to that since civilisation really started.

Now, Germany has suffered immense casualties of war over the last few decades because, essentially, they started both of those wars (for different reasons). But if we look back at the 30 years war – now this was in 1618 to 1648 – that started because the emperor of The Holy Roman Empire wanted to force all of Europe to become Catholics. And so there was this religious war, and in the 30 years war 20% of the German population died. And in World War II almost 11% of the German people died, but the population was that much bigger that actually it was a smaller percentage of their total population.

Briefly we want to look at religious persecution. We'll all have heard of Isis, some of you may have heard of Boko Haram which is particularly focused in Nigeria; now they have killed thousands of people, thousands of Christians, but the interesting thing is they've killed many more Muslims than Christians. And it's important to recognise that they are not regarded as good Muslims in that sense – the Muslim people are as much against things like Isis and Boko Haram as anyone else is. The death toll is thought to be similar to that of the emperor Diocletian – now he was an emperor in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and he particularly persecuted Christians. It's thought that ancient reports said that Diocletian killed 17 thousand Christians just in one month. 17 thousand Christians! And he executed 20 thousand believers just in his home city, his capital city, of Nicomedia which is in modern Turkey. Now these numbers are comparable to what Isis was doing at its strongest, but the difference is that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Diocletian was persecuting the church which was about 1 million people, whereas today we estimate the church to be about 2.5 billion people. The numbers may be similar, but the church is vastly bigger than it was when Diocletian was persecuting.

Very briefly we're going to have a look at a list of different plagues and famines (not a comprehensive list):

Ebola	We think Ebola killed just over 11,000 people
Covid-19	The last figures I could find: there's been about 870,000 people have died across the world
HIV	Aids is thought to have killed 1.7 million people, but it's done so since the 1980s (that's been a much longer period)
Bubonic plague	Thought to have killed 15 million people
The Spanish Flu	The estimate here is vast: it's 17-50 million – certainly millions of people died in what we call the Spanish Flu which was about 100 years ago

But interestingly the colonisation of the Americas, that is the North and South, is thought to have caused the death of 50 million people, and that was particularly because of western diseases: measles, small pox, 'flu, and whooping cough – these diseases that the westerners didn't realise when they went to the Americas didn't realise were taking with them, and it's thought to have killed 50 million native tribes in the Americas, North and South.

What did Jesus say? What did Jesus say about all this worry about plagues and famine, and the end of the world? As we read earlier Jesus said, "You'll hear of wars and rumours of wars but see to it you are not alarmed. Such things must happen but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, there'll be famines and earthquakes, but all these things are but the beginning of birth pains." What's Jesus saying there? Don't be alarmed, don't get alarmed by world events. Matthew's gospel was probably written about 80-90 AD. In other words about 50 to 60 years after Jesus' death. And that was an incredibly important time because 10 to

20 years before that we had in AD 70 the destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple, by the Romans. For the Jews the destruction of the temple was like the destruction of the heart of their faith: "If the temple's been destroyed how can we continue to have faith? How can we continue without a focus for our worship as Jewish people?" After the destruction of the temple in 73-74 AD the remaining Jewish zealots (they were the ones still fighting for the independence of the Jewish nation from Rome) went to Masada. Masada is a fortress on top of an outcrop of rock. The remaining Jewish people went up to this fortress and they hid themselves away - took some food with them and some water, and hid themselves away there and thought the Roman Empire, the army, will never be able to get to us. But, that there [in the picture] is a siege tower, and the Romans built 75 ft high siege towers, and then got slaves to build a ramp up the side of Masada, and then forced the slaves to this siege tower up the ramp, up against the side of the Masada fortress, and then soldiers climbed over and got into the fortress, and they breached the walls of the fortress. In the end 960 Jewish people, including children, killed themselves (or I'm guessing their parents probably killed the children) to avoid capture by the Roman Empire.

I say all of that because Jesus is saying (in the context of all these horrendous events that have gone on, and Matthew is reporting it in his gospel, recognising all the awful things that have happened), "Don't be alarmed! Don't think that this is the end, instead it all depends on your perspective." Matthew was writing after all these world shattering events, but he's reminding his readers of Jesus' words: this is just the very beginning of a long drawn out process, and, as those of you who have had children know, childbirth may start but you don't now when it's going to end! And some of you may have thought when you were having children, "will this ever end?" But it did. And in the same way Matthew is reminding his readers of Jesus' words, saying the end will come one day but you do not know when it will come, so don't get drawn into wondering about dates and times.

So, don't get alarmed by world events, and, secondly, don't assume that things will always get worse and worse. Remember that terrible wars and disasters have happened down through history. We mustn't give into this idea that things are worse now than they ever have been. It isn't true. It isn't true. People, human beings, have always engaged in wars and rumours of wars, and all sorts of awful behaviour down through history.

Finally, Jesus gives only one sign of the end, right at the end of verses that we read a moment or two ago, and that sign of the end is: "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 Jesus is saying if you want a sign of the end coming, when everyone has had the chance to hear and respond to my good news of the love and the care that God has for every person in this world - that's the only sign I'm going to give you says Jesus. Don't listen to the war mongers and those who are giving negative pictures all the while of what's going on in our world - these things have always happened. God's Love, God's redemption, God's reaching out to rescue our world - that's the only sign that Jesus says he'll give us.

Amen