

JESUS' MINISTRY IN JERUSALEM

Luke 19:41 - 21:38

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem

This powerful scene sets the mood for Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. The language is traditional, drawing on words used by the prophets in describing the siege of a city (Jeremiah 52:4; Hosea 10:14), and its destruction (2Samuel 17:13; Micah 1:6).

This fate awaits Jerusalem. The historical reasons for the destruction of the city are, no doubt, quite complex. Jesus' disciples judged that had Jerusalem accepted Jesus and his message of peace, the Roman-Jewish antagonism that led to the revolt and its cruel suppression would not have eventuated. In this view the destruction happened because its inhabitants refuse to welcome 'the one who is to come' (7:20). Jesus is the rising sun who, by the tender mercy of God has come to visit them (2:78), but they refuse to walk in his light.

⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

The Messiah judges the Temple

⁴⁵ Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; ⁴⁶ and he said, 'It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers.'

The triumph of Jesus' Messianic entry into Jerusalem (19:36-40), described against the background of the prophecies of Zechariah, prepared the reader for Jesus, as the Messiah, to 'build the temple of the Lord' (Zechariah 6:13). This makes the anticlimax of the present scene all the more dramatically powerful.

In a symbolic gesture, as the Messiah, he takes charge of the temple and purifies it, removing all that is profane and acting out the final words of Zechariah:

There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

– Zechariah 14:21

Jesus explains his action: 'My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers' (19:46). This prophetic condemnation is drawn partly from Isaiah and partly from Jeremiah. Both texts are instructive.

The quotation from Isaiah is taken from the beginning of the material from the disciples of 'Second Isaiah', the anonymous author of Isaiah 40-55. These disciples were active in the first years of the temple of Zerubbabel, and they tried to retain the universal vision of their master at a time when many were using the word of God and the institutions of religion to support more narrow nationalist ends. The whole text is worth quoting as it provides an excellent commentary on the scene before us. It is a call for justice, and an indictment of those who would keep religion for themselves to the exclusion of others:

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed ... Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

– Isaiah 56:1-8

Jesus is passing judgment on the religious institution as used by the authorities who rejected the good news in favour of their own interpretation of God's will. We find Stephen passing a similar judgment (Acts 7:48-49; 6:13).

The second quotation takes us back to the last days of Solomon's temple, just before the destruction of Jerusalem (587BC). Once again the whole text provides a powerful commentary on the scene upon which we are reflecting:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 7:1-11

Jeremiah's contemporaries thought that they were safe because God's temple was in their midst. Jeremiah warns them that God will only dwell with them if they honour the covenant. God is not a prisoner of a building or of an institution. God remains faithful. If, however, we are unfaithful we do not receive the grace God is offering, nor can we mediate it to others. Jesus is making the same critique of those who maintained the temple institution while rejecting the good news.

⁴⁷ *Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him;*
⁴⁸ *but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.*

compare Mark 11:18

The Jewish authorities determine to kill Jesus

Jesus is in the temple by right. As he said to his parents on his entry into his maturity: 'I must be in my Father's house' (2:49). His teaching is rightly understood by the religious leaders as undermining their position of power in the community. They will have the same problem later with Stephen (Acts 6:1-14), and with Paul (Acts 21:28).

They are determined to kill him (compare 6:11), but for the moment they can do nothing, for the people are hanging on his words.

The scenes which follow the emptying of the temple contain cryptic claims that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus' Messianic authority

In the introduction to this scene, Luke distinguishes between 'the people' whom Jesus is teaching and their leaders. Throughout this whole section (19:41 - 21:4) the people are with Jesus. It is their leaders who are against him.

The authority with which Jesus speaks has been apparent from the beginning of the gospel: 'They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority' (4:32)

Luke places this scene here to make the obvious but important point that Jesus' authority for acting the way he has in the temple is an authority, like that of the Baptist, which comes from God. Furthermore, to believe John the Baptist is to believe in Jesus, for Jesus is the Messiah heralded by John (1:76-77; 3:4-6; 3:16; 7:27).

It is clear that those who claim religious authority, identified here as the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, lack authority, for they have no genuine concern for the truth. In the words of the author of the fourth gospel, who is making much the same point:

How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?

– John 5:44

¹ One day, as he was *teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news*, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders

² and said to him, 'Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?'

³ He answered them, 'I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: ⁴ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?'

⁵ They discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'

⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' *all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.*'

⁷ So they answered that they did not know where it came from.

⁸ Then Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

compare Matthew 21:23-27
Mark 11:27-33

God's beloved Son

⁹ He began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. ¹⁰ When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

compare Matthew 21:33-39
Mark 12:1-8

This is clearly a judgment on those who are responsible for caring for the community but who are unfaithful to the covenant. They are using God's gifts for their own advantage, rather than in the service of their Lord (compare Hosea 2:7-10; Ezekiel 16:15-19) and they reject those sent by God to speak God's word. We find a similar judgment in Isaiah on whose parable Jesus is building:

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

– Isaiah 5:1-7

Jesus' parable adds the idea that the owner of the vineyard 'will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others'. Those responsible for rejecting Jesus will not enjoy the fruits of the kingdom. Those, Jews and Gentiles alike, who form the repentant and renewed Israel, the 'holy nation' (Exodus 19:6) – in other words the Christian Church (1Peter 2:9) – will be the ones who carry on their commission to give God the produce at the time of the harvest.

The presence of Jews in the Church and the continuing relationship between God and the people of Israel (see Romans 9-11) support Luke's distinction between the ordinary people who are open to Jesus and their leaders who are responsible for rejecting him.

Jesus, the ‘beloved son’ (one thinks of Isaac, Genesis 22:2) is thrown out of the vineyard and killed. This is a clear allusion to Jesus being rejected by the Sanhedrin, handed over to non-Jews and killed and buried outside the city.

Verse seventeen includes a quotation from Psalm 118:22. The image is of a stone which has been judged unsuitable for inclusion in a wall. Later it is found to be the perfect shape for the angle of the wall, and thus to play a critical role in shaping the whole building and holding it together. The application to Jesus is obvious. Luke quotes the verse again in the second part of his work (Acts 4:11).

Addressing himself to non-Jews, Paul sums up his teaching on the significance for them of Jesus the ‘cornerstone’:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

– Ephesians 2:19-22

There are close parallels between this parable and the following from the First Letter of Peter:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

– 1Peter 2:4-10

What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?

¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.’

When they heard this, they said, ‘Heaven forbid!’

¹⁷ But he looked at them and said, ‘What then does this text mean: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’?

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

¹⁹ When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people.

compare Matthew 21:40-46
Mark 12:9-12

20 So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor.

21 So they asked him, 'Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.

22 Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' 23 But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 24 'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.'

25 He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' 26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

compare Mark 12:13-17
Matthew 22:15-22

Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders

To understand why the question put to him by the Jewish leaders was indeed a trap, we need to recall the political situation at the time. Herod the Great (1:5), an Idumean by birth, had won favour with the Emperor Octavian (Caesar Augustus, 2:1), and had been appointed king of Palestine by the Roman senate. On his death in 4BC, the country was divided between three of his sons. Herod Antipas (3:1,19; 8:3; 9:7-9; 13:31) governed Galilee and Peraea (also called Transjordan as it was on the east side of the river). Philip governed Ituraea and Trachonitis (south of Damascus and Abilene, and east of Galilee). Archelaus ruled the bulk of Palestine, comprising Samaria, Judea and Idumaea.

In 6AD the Jews petitioned Rome to have Archelaus removed, and Rome took the occasion to establish direct rule over his area. Judea was set up as a small imperial province, under a military prefect (also called a procurator), who was directly answerable to the emperor, but was also connected in some way with the legate of the more established province of Syria. A military garrison was quartered at Caesarea. Quirinius, the legate of Syria, arranged for a census to be taken with a view to organising a poll tax to be paid into the Imperial treasury. It is with this tax that the present passage is concerned.

Many Jews resented Roman occupation and the poll tax. A man from Galilee called Judas (Acts 5:37) organised a resistance movement which was quickly suppressed. Foreign tax is never well received, but at the time of Jesus' public ministry the Pharisees accepted to pay the tax as a price for retaining their religious 'freedom'.

The scene before us took place just before the feast of Passover. There were many Galileans among those gathering for the feast and no doubt the Romans were prepared for any disturbance. What better way to get Jesus into trouble than to have him speak out against the tax? He would certainly lose a lot of his following if he spoke in its favour.

Jesus meets their question with one of his own. Referring to the coin, he asks: ‘Whose head and whose title does it bear?’ On one side of the coin was an impression of the Emperor Tiberias and on the other the inscription ‘Tiberias Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, High Priest’.

They produce a coin, thus trapping themselves. The people know that they are the very ones who benefit most from the economic advantages of Roman occupation and from the coins used for the tax.

Jesus bypasses the question of tax and goes to the heart of the matter. If the coin they have belongs to the emperor let them return it to him. Their first obligation is to make sure that they give back to God what belongs to God. Jesus is speaking against Jewish compromise with Roman paganism, whether by benefiting from it or by revolting against it. They are to obey God, and love their enemies by fulfilling their mission of revealing to them God’s love.

Jesus does not directly answer their question but he does provide the basis on which a true answer must rest. The answer to their question, and to every other question in the complex arena of politics, will be found only if we strive before all else to be obedient to God and so to be instruments of effecting the reign of God in our world.

In avoiding their trap, Jesus is not saying that their question is unimportant nor is he denying the importance of politics. He himself took up a deliberate political stance particularly in his relationship with the poor. He could see his people heading towards war and destruction unless they made a radical change. He was convinced that the change had to be first and foremost in their relationship with God. Everywhere Jesus looked he saw oppression. He saw people downtrodden, enslaved, oppressed. Whole groups of society were lost, frustrated, helpless, living in disgrace, suffering under the weight of guilt, anxiety and superstition. The only answer was a change of mind and heart.

Jesus took the political decision to align himself with the oppressed. It is for this reason that he identified himself as the Son of Man. As we have seen, part of the liberation he strove to achieve was liberation from oppression, including that caused by those who exercised power in God’s name because of their position in regard to the teaching of the Scriptures (the ‘Law’) and the organisation of the temple cult.

In the scene before us he challenges them to give back whatever power they have that comes from the emperor and to give to God ‘the things that are God’s’.

Jesus exposes the errors of the Sadducees

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died.

³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.' ³⁴ Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;

This is the first and only time Luke mentions the Sadducees in his gospel. In the Acts, he tells us:

The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection.

– Acts 23:8

The Sadducees were a group which centred on the high priest, who, in the absence of a king, played a central role in Judaism in the post-exilic period (after 520BC). During the period of Greek domination (333-167BC), the priestly aristocracy became largely secular in outlook. They formed the nucleus of the group who benefited most from the conquest of Palestine achieved during the period of Jewish independence under the Hasmoneans (142-63BC).

The name 'Sadducees', by which this party was known, probably goes back to Zadoc, one of David's chief priests (2Samuel 15:24). They accommodated to the Romans after 63BC, and had no sympathy with any group who took religion seriously in a way that might disturb their position of power and influence. They acknowledged the importance of the Law, but opposed ideas that could not be firmly established from the Pentateuch. One such idea was that of the resurrection from the dead.

Traditionally, the Jews, like their neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld. Here the dead person existed in a form that was shadowy and lifeless. There are indications of this idea in the sacred Scriptures:

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5; also Psalm 115:17 and Isaiah 38:18-19

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, that would preserve them from death and Sheol:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for ever more.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

compare

Matthew 22:23-28

Mark 12:18-25

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

It was this faith in the fidelity of God that grew into an explicit belief that God would raise from death to life those who put their trust in God and were faithful to the covenant. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the Syrian persecutions (168-165BC). It seemed impossible that God would not reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2. See 2Maccabees 7

The resurrection from the dead is a very different idea from the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul. The Pharisees and others believed that the whole person in some way would be given fullness of life again by God.

The Sadducees are trying to show up the stupidity of the idea of resurrection from the impossible complications it would introduce into one particular regulation of the Law. It was necessary for the maintenance of a family's heritage that there be an heir. This was so important that if a man died childless, his brother was obliged to take his sister-in-law as his wife, and in that way provide an heir for his dead brother and so thwart a serious consequence of death (Deuteronomy 25:5 and Genesis 38:8-9).

Jesus' reply in no way denies that the special relationship of married love experienced in this life finds its perfection in the life to come. His reply is geared directly to the question asked. There is no death in heaven and so no need for those in heaven to avoid the consequences of death by marrying to ensure an heir. Like the angels, those who are raised to life will never die. Jesus refers the Sadducees to Exodus 3:6. His argument, is simple and direct: God is 'the God not of the dead but of the living'.

³⁵ *but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.* ³⁶ *Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.*

³⁷ **And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.**

³⁸ **Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'**

³⁹ *Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.'*

⁴⁰ **For they no longer dared to ask him another question.**

compare Matthew 22:30-33
Mark 12:25-27
verse 40, compare
Matthew 22:46; Mark 12:34

Who really is the Messiah?

41 Then he said to them, 'How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? 42 For David himself says in the book of Psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, 43 until I make your enemies your footstool.' 44 David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?'

In the previous two scenes, Jesus has responded to questions posed as a test by those who refused to accept him. Now it is his turn to put a question to them. He does so in an attempt to bring them to recognise the limits of their knowledge. They think that they have the answers to the important religious questions. Can they answer his question concerning the true identity of the Davidic Messiah?

They understand that 'the Messiah is David's son'. This is something already claimed for Jesus by Luke in his genealogy (3:23-31), and a central theme of Luke's from the beginning of the gospel is that Jesus is the Messiah (1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11; 3:31; 6:3; 9:20; 18:38-39).

Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 in which the term 'lord' is used of the king. There is abundant evidence that this psalm was used by the early church to support the Christian claim that the risen exalted Jesus was the fulfilment of Jewish Messianic hopes (Acts 2:34; 7:56; Romans 8:34; 1Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 1Peter 3:22; Revelation 3:21). But does being David's son and so king fully describe what God has in mind for the Messiah? Jesus wants to focus the attention of his listeners on the Messiah's relationship to God. Luke's teacher, Paul, sums up the faith of Jesus' disciples when he speaks of the:

gospel concerning God's Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness, by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Romans 1:3-4

Psalm 110 is the psalm that speaks of the priesthood of Melchizedek. Jesus is confronting the regime of the Levitical priests. The enthroned Messiah is their judge.

As we approach the end of Jesus' public ministry, Luke wants us to be aware of the divine mystery of Jesus' person, and to recognise that while Jesus does transcend the expectations of the Law and the prophets, there are indications in the sacred scriptures of what is soon to be revealed in his death and resurrection.

compare
Matthew 22:41-46
Mark 12:35-37

Jesus' judgment of the scribes

Tragically, this is Jesus judgment of those who used their expertise in the knowledge of the sacred Scriptures for furthering their own interests and for taking advantage of the defenceless, but who failed to hear the good news of God.

⁴⁵ *In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples,*

⁴⁶ **'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets.**

⁴⁷ **They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'**

compare Mark 12:38-40

**¹ He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury;
² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.
³ He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them;
⁴ for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'**

compare Mark 12:41-44

The nature of true discipleship

This scene is capable of two quite conflicting interpretations. If we look at it as a straightforward narrative, we might see it as an extension and illustration of the criticism Jesus has just levelled at the scribes who 'devour widow's houses' (20:47). Here is an example of a poor widow giving her last resources to support the building of a place of worship which Jesus has already symbolically emptied (19:45), and which will soon be made desolate (21:20; see 19:41-44).

The scene, however, can be taken another way. Luke, in an earlier section, made much of the narrative of the loaves (9:12-17). The lesson is that we should not measure our gifts by their appearance, but that we all have within our hands the means to carry out God's will provided that we consecrate our gifts to God and continually look to God as their source.

Could it be that Jesus, having shown the emptiness of the religion of the scribes, is presenting this poor widow as a contrasting example of someone who gives all she has, little though it be, to build the temple treasury, a symbol for the 'house of prayer' (19:46) and so of the community of faith which Jesus himself was calling together?

This is Luke's final portrait before the 'eschatological discourse' and the narrative of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. We would expect Luke to supply us with something powerfully symbolic to sum up the essence of Jesus' ministry. It seems to me that is what he has given us here.

If the poor widow can contribute to the building of the kingdom of God, we all can, provided that we do what she did. We are not asked to give more than we have. We are not asked to give what we used to have, or what we should have, or what we would like to have, or what others expect us to have. Whatever our situation at the moment, all that God asks of us now is that we offer ourselves to God as we now are — all that we are and all that we have — so that through us God's will can be done.

God's judgment of human history [Luke 21:5-38]

Luke has one final theme which he wishes to present before focusing our attention on Jesus' death and resurrection. Having completed his treatment of discipleship in the context of journeying with Jesus, Luke has just portrayed Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem as a confrontation with the religious leaders. Institutional religion must pass through a conversion if it is to be a vehicle for God's saving action as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now Luke wishes to expand our vision to take in the whole of human history. He wants to make the point that all history is to be judged by its encounter with the one who, as the Son of Man, takes the side of the oppressed and refuses to support or vindicate any exercise of power that does not flow from God's love. Again and again, Luke has reflected on the nature of God's kingdom, that is to say, on the way God chooses to act in history. He has pointed out that our liberation is found in opening our hearts to receive this healing love and in mediating it to others. Jesus calls every man and every woman to share in his mission by becoming his disciple.

In an earlier section Luke recorded Jesus as saying that the time would come when people would long to see 'one of the days of the Son of Man' and would fail to see it (Luke 17:22). Here, in this final discourse, Luke is making the point that each generation is to be judged by the way it reacts to the presence of the Son of Man.

At the heart of Israel's faith lies the experience of the exodus. For the people of Israel the liberation from slavery in Egypt was the event which gave them their basic insight into God and their basic insight into their identity as a people. It was a mighty act of God, or as they preferred to call it a 'Day of the Lord'. On that 'day' God was revealed as one who hears the cry of the poor and oppressed and delivers them from slavery:

The Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

– Exodus 3:7-8

On that 'day' the Lord, the God of mercy and compassion, liberated them through Moses, formed them into a people, made a covenant with them, and gave them the Promised Land. Again and again in their history, they believed that it was the Lord who delivered them from oppression. Two notable 'days of the Lord' were the miraculous saving of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army which had already overrun Judah (701BC, 2Kings 18:13 – 19:37), and the deliverance of the Babylonian exiles through Cyrus of Persia (538BC, 2Chronicles 36:22-23).

Catastrophes in their history were also understood as 'days of the Lord', for they judged that God could not allow injustice to triumph, and so was seen as punishing them for their infidelity to the covenant. Two such 'days' were the untimely death of the saintly king Josiah in the battle of Megiddo (609BC, 2Kings 23:29-30) and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army (587BC, 2Kings 25:9).

The eschatological discourse

Many of the prophetic scrolls include passages which look forward to a final ‘day of the Lord’, when all evil will be destroyed and good will ultimately be vindicated by God. This is the background and context of this present discourse.

As the Son of Man, Jesus identifies with us in our human condition, especially in our frailty and our suffering. Before contemplating the scenes in which this reaches its climax, Luke wants his readers to realise that no one can be unaffected by what we are going to witness. Jesus identifies with us. If we want to experience the liberation and the healing which he offers, we have to identify with him. We must believe what he reveals and we must choose to live accordingly. This is true for every generation. On this is history ultimately judged.

This seems a good place to introduce three technical terms that are commonly used when commenting on this section. A key idea is that of the ‘coming’ or better the ‘presence’ of the Son of Man. Commentators and theologians sometimes identify this by using the Greek word ‘parousia’.

Another technical term is ‘eschatological’ – a word taken over from the Greek *eschata*, meaning ‘the final things’. This section of Luke is sometimes referred to as the ‘eschatological discourse’ because of its content.

Finally, the word ‘apocalyptic’ is sometimes used to describe not the content but the style of some of this discourse. The Greek word *apokalupsis* means ‘revelation’. It is used to describe the kind of literary form which we find in passages that look above and beyond actual historical events to present, in visionary form and in language that relies heavily on images and symbolism, an inspired insight into God’s transcendent design. It is found, for example, in large sections of the book of Daniel and in other biblical material from the last years of the Old Testament. It was also a favourite literary form for much of the non-biblical material of the two hundred years prior to Jesus.

It focuses attention on the way in which God will intervene decisively to bring about the fulfilment of his promises and the climax of Israel’s history. Luke presents the life of Jesus as the way in which God has chosen to vindicate the just, to bring Israel’s exile to an end, to rebuild the true temple, and to establish a final covenant, meant for the whole world. God has done something ultimate in Jesus’ ministry. People must repent to be part of God’s new order.

Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple

Twice already, Jesus has spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.

– Luke 13:34-35

The days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.

– Luke 19:43-44

Jesus is echoing the lament of Jeremiah on the occasion of the destruction of the first temple centuries earlier (587BC):

Because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh.

– Jeremiah 7:13-14

The Christian community interpreted the second destruction of Jerusalem (70AD) as the consequence of the people's failure to heed God's word preached to them by Jesus. Already in Luke we have heard Simeon speaking of Jesus being the occasion for the falling of many in Israel (2:34). We have also heard the Baptist saying that trees that fail to produce fruit will be cut down and burned (3:9), and Jesus has warned that a town which refused to accept the good news would suffer a fate worse even than Sodom (10:11-12).

Luke begins his final discourse with the temple, because it stands as a warning to every generation of the importance of heeding the revelation of the good news given by Jesus. Those to whom Jesus is speaking want to know when the temple will be destroyed and the signs that will warn them. This sets the scene for Luke's reflection on God's judgment of history.

⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' ⁷ They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?'

compare
Matthew 24:1-3
Mark 13:1-4

⁸ And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and *insurrections*, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.'

compare Mark 13:5-7

A warning against deception by false messiahs

Jesus is warning his disciples (a warning which Luke continues for his community) to expect false Messianic claims and alarmist predictions. They are not to be deceived by them nor to lose heart.

Paul's letters witness to the fact that many disciples were led astray by people who claimed to be speaking in Jesus' name, but who were false prophets. One need only think of the divisions in the Church in Corinth.

In the Acts, Luke gives two examples of false messiahs, Theudas (Acts 5:36), and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37). The terrible experiences of the Jewish war (66-73AD) would have provided many opportunities for alarmists to announce the coming end of the world. No period of history has been free from sects that claim to be able to predict the timing of the end of the world, using catastrophes such as Luke mentions here as what they claim to be sure indications.

Luke reminds his readers that Jesus warned them to be vigilant and not to be influenced by such predictions.

A warning to expect war and catastrophes

The language of this section draws on biblical imagery. The following two passages should suffice to indicate this. In an oracle against Babylon, seen as a symbol of any power that dares to stand against the Lord, we read in the Isaiah scroll:

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt, and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labour. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame. See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. ... Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

– Isaiah 13:6-10,13

Jesus' disciples believed that he had inaugurated the new creation promised by God. One can readily sense how terrified they were (see 21:9) when, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the old patterns of war, earthquake, famine and plague continued as though nothing had changed. Luke is

¹⁰ Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;

¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

compare
Matthew 24:7
Mark 13:8

12 But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

13 This will give you an opportunity to testify.

14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance;

15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name.

18 But not a hair of your head will perish.

19 By your endurance you will gain your souls'.

compare
Matthew 10:17-22
Mark 13:9-13

verse 19,
compare Matthew 24:13

A warning to expect persecution

This is not the first time that Jesus has warned his disciples to expect to be persecuted. Simeon warned that Jesus himself would be rejected (2:34). His ministry in Galilee began with a rejection scene in Nazareth (4:24), and his journey to Jerusalem opened with a rejection by the Samaritans (9:53). We have seen Jesus being rejected by the religious leaders (6:11; 11:15), and by the fickle crowd (7:34).

On earlier occasions Jesus has warned his disciples not to be surprised when they are treated in the same way. We recall the following promise and exhortation:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

– Luke 6:22-23

We recall also Jesus' earlier advice:

When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.

– Luke 12:11-12

That the Holy Spirit is Jesus' own Spirit is made clear in the present passage where Jesus promises that he himself will enlighten and encourage them. They will suffer as he suffered before them, but he will sustain them. Their suffering, like that of Jesus, can be an instrument for the proclaiming of the good news.

Jesus' final words express the basic theme of all eschatological writings: 'By your endurance you will gain your souls' (see Revelation 13:10; 14:12).

The Jewish-Roman war: an example of the suffering that Christians are to expect

The siege and capture of Jerusalem has already been described by Luke:

The days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.

– Luke 19:43-44

In the present passage we meet the word ‘desolation’. It echoes an expression found in the Book of Daniel, the classical reference book for writings concerned with the last things (*eschata*). There it refers to the sacrilege of placing a statue of Zeus on the altar of holocausts in the sanctuary of the Jewish temple (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; see also 1Maccabees 1:54; 2Maccabees 6:2). Luke sees the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman armies as another example of this proud defiance of God.

The plight of the fugitives created by the Jewish-Roman war is graphically portrayed. Luke’s final remark recalls the hope expressed by Paul:

A hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

– Romans 11:25

The destruction of Jerusalem is also significant for Luke as a symbol of the way God works. It was this very destruction which was the occasion for God’s grace to reach out to the Gentile world (21:24).

It is ever thus with God. Only when our world collapses are we ready to look to God. However, when our world does collapse, we can be sure that God’s grace is present in abundance to raise life out of death, as we will see him doing at the crucifixion of his Son.

²⁰ *When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.*

²¹ **Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it;** ²² *for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written.*

²³ **Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people;**

²⁴ *they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*

compare
Matthew 24:15-22
Mark 13:14-20

God's definitive judgment

²⁵ ***There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.***

²⁶ ***People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.***

²⁷ ***Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.***

²⁸ ***Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'***

In a restrained way, Luke paints a rapid picture of the 'final judgment'. Some of the images come from Isaiah 13:10,13, but they are common in biblical literature concerning the end times. Luke's point is simple: Jesus' disciples have nothing to fear from God's judgment, because Jesus the 'Son of Man' will be there, and those who have endured (21:19) will all be gathered to him. Jesus has been raised 'with power and great glory'. His disciples will share in this.

Luke quotes from Daniel 7:13 — a quotation alluded to in the trial before the Sanhedrin (22:69) — and brings to a climax his description of Jesus as the Son of Man (first introduced in 5:24). For those with eyes to see, the revelation of the Son of Man is realised on Calvary, for, as Jesus goes on to say in the following passage, 'you will see these things taking place' (21:31). It is in Jesus' manner of dying that God's final judgment on humankind is revealed.

Luke speaks of the final judgment of God as a 'redemption'. This word occurs nowhere else in any of the gospels, but is a favourite word in Paul's theology. Luke would agree with the following advice given by his mentor, Paul, in his earliest extant letter. We have no idea of the timing of the final judgment, but we do know how to live in the meantime. If we live in this way, we have nothing to fear, but can hold our head high in expectation of liberation:

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober ... Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

— 1Thessalonians 5:1-6,8-10

Peter goes further, encouraging the Christian community to hasten the fulfilment of God's promised paradise by their holiness:

You are to lead lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the Day of God ... the new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

— 2Peter 3:11-13

compare
Matthew 24:29-31
Mark 13:24-27

God's definitive judgment is imminent

The destruction of the temple (21:6-7) will happen within their generation. The deception, the violence, the persecution and the sacrilege ('these things', 21:28, 31) are about to take place in the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. They will be able to see it all for themselves.

Luke seems already to be presenting a theology of the cross that will be developed strongly by John who sees it as Jesus' hour of glory. Those who look with the eyes of faith will see there the 'Son of Man coming in power and great glory' (21:27). In redeeming his Son from death in the resurrection, God is promising to redeem also all those who believe in him and who follow him as his disciples. We recall Jesus' words on an earlier occasion: 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God' (9:27). Two passages from Luke's second work, Acts, are relevant here.

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

– Acts 1:7

Turn to God ... so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration.

– Acts 3:20-21

²⁹ **Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees;**

³⁰ **as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.**

³¹ **So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.**

³² **Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.**

³³ **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

compare
Matthew 24:32-36
Mark 13:28-32

³⁴ 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.

³⁵ For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

All must face God's judgment

Every person has to face the judgment of God. Luke stresses the need for all of us to be vigilant, and, typically, he stresses the need for prayer. Jesus ends the 'Our Father' in the same way (11:4).

Conclusion

With these words, Luke concludes the eschatological discourse. He brings us back to the 'Mount of Olives' (see 19:29), the traditional site for the final judgment, for that judgment is about to be carried out in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We will all stand or fall by our response to what we are about to witness.

³⁷ Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called.

³⁸ And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.