

GOD'S JUDGMENT
Mark 11:1 - 13:37

PART A: God's judgment of religion (11:1 - 12:44)

Jesus enters the temple

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶ They told them

compare
Matthew 21:1-7
Luke 19:28-35

This scene is charged with excitement and Messianic expectation, which, however fizzles out like a burst balloon, in the anticlimax of the final sentence (verse eleven).

The temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonian army in 587BC as a result of an ill-conceived uprising, some ten years after the capture of the city and the beginning of exile for many of the leading citizens. However, the Babylonian Empire was powerful only during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, and in 539BC, king Cyrus of Persia was welcomed into Babylon as a liberator. The following year he issued an edict permitting the exiles to return home (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5; 1Chronicles 36:22-23). In 520BC Zerubbabel, a prince of the Davidic line, was sent to Jerusalem, not as an independent king but as an administrator of Persian rule. With him went Joshua the high priest, at the head of a large contingent of returning Jews (Ezra 2:2b-70 = Nehemiah 7:7b-73; 1Chronicles 3:19). Encouraged by Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel organised the rebuilding of the temple. It is this temple, enlarged by Herod the Great, that Jesus enters in this present scene

The words of the prophet Zechariah form the background to Mark's account. Zechariah saw Zerubbabel as God's instrument to restore the fortunes of the house of David. He was the 'Branch' that, having learned humility from the experience of the exile, would at last bear fruit and bring about the time of Messianic peace:

Now listen, Joshua, high priest ... I am going to bring my servant the Branch. For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree.

– Zechariah 3:8-10

Zechariah continues:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he that shall build the temple of the Lord.

– Zechariah 6:12-13

He then describes the entry of the Messiah into the temple:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

– Zechariah 9:9

In the period between Zerubbabel and Jesus the words of the prophet were understood as reaching beyond his own time to the time of the coming of the promised Messiah. The restoration and re-dedication of the temple was, indeed, a Day of the Lord. It came to be seen as a foreshadowing of the ultimate Day of the Lord, when God's reign would come and God's chosen people would be vindicated against their enemies. In visionary material from the Zechariah scroll we read:

Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley.

– Zechariah 14:3-4

Mark is alluding to this passage when he sets the scene 'near the Mount of Olives', preparing us for a scene of divine judgment. Incidentally, the other places mentioned also have symbolic importance for this section. 'Bethphage' means 'house of unripe figs'; and 'Bethany' means 'house of poverty/affliction'.

'The Lord' of verse three is the Lord who 'will suddenly come to his temple' (Malachi 3:1). His instructions to the two disciples define him as being in complete command of the situation. The people 'spread their cloaks on the road', indicating their submission to the kingly rule of the Messiah. The branches and the song from Psalm 118:25-26 are from the liturgy of the feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the universal kingship of the Lord and the dedication of the temple. Surely here is the one who inherits the promise made to David. Surely he is now going to 'build the temple of the Lord' (Zechariah 6:13). Surely now the fig-tree which is Israel will be covered with fruit to nourish God's people (Zechariah 3:10).

what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' ¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at every-thing, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

compare Matthew 21:8-11
Luke 19:36-40

Jesus enters the temple

Not so! The scene ends in a dramatic anticlimax, as Jesus 'looked around at 'everything' with eyes that pierce to the heart and that judge according to the truth (see 3:5,34; 5:32; 10:23). He then leaves the temple with the twelve. The break, as we shall see, is final. The following scene demonstrates that Jesus is the one who fulfils the prophecies, but in a way that is totally unexpected, and that transcends everything ever imagined of the Messiah.

The essence of true religion

In this passage we witness Mark's dramatic skills at their best. He has two scenes, one centring on a fig tree and the other on the temple. The scene with the fig tree acts as a kind of frame within which we focus on the temple. Clearly the scenes reinforce and comment on each other. Both represent symbolically a religious institution which is failing to mediate God. Then, by contrast, Jesus explains what is essential to true religion.

Mark arouses interest by the puzzling story of the fig tree. His explicit comment that 'it was not the season for figs', surely alerts us to expect some deeper meaning. Jesus is 'hungry', sharing in the hunger of every man and every woman for the food that satisfies the soul. He goes to the tree that is a symbol for the religion of his people, a tree that was supposed to blossom and bear fruit in the promised Messianic times (Zechariah 3:10; 1Maccabees 14:12). This tree is all leaf, all show. Jesus' judgment means that its time is over. We will have to look elsewhere to satisfy our hunger.

When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

– Jeremiah 8:13

There is no fig for which I hunger. The faithful have disappeared from the land.

– Micah 7:1

We pass immediately to the temple. It was expected that the Messiah would build the sanctuary (Zechariah 6:13). In a symbolic gesture, he 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

I will drive them out of my house.

– Isaiah 9:15

¹² **On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.** ¹³ **Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see *whether perhaps he would find anything on it.*** **When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.** ¹⁴ **He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.'** **And his disciples heard it.** ¹⁵ **Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves;** ¹⁶ ***and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.***

¹⁷ **He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'**

¹⁸ **And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.** ¹⁹ ***And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went* ['used to go'] *out of the city.***

compare Matthew 21:12-17
Luke 19:45-48

Jesus clears the temple

Jesus goes further, not allowing ‘anyone to carry anything through the temple’. The time for the temple to mediate grace has come to an end. And the reason? ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of robbers’. 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 added to the Isaiah scroll by the disciples of the anonymous author of Isaiah 40-55. They 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 their own narrow nationalist ends, and so were failing to reach out as God’s servants to ‘all the nations’.

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. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. 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. 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 dwell with them only 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. Mentioned for the first time are the 'chief priests'.

The most solemn liturgical week of the year, called 'Holy Week', is that leading up to the celebration of the resurrection. It opens, on Palm Sunday, with the gospel of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Coming as it does at the beginning of the week when we commemorate Jesus' great act of redemption, this could be an occasion for every community that claims to be Christian to make a profound critique of itself in the light of the passage we have just read.

When Jesus enters our church on Palm Sunday, would he see people's spiritual hunger being attended to there? Would he recognise the community as the temple of his 'Body', living by his Spirit? Would he see it welcoming the stranger and the poor? Or would he be forced to empty it because it was failing to mediate God's redeeming grace 'to all the peoples'?

As examples of such a critique we might read the Letters to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation (2:1 - 3:22). It would be even more relevant for each diocese and each parish to take the occasion to go through an organised process of self-evaluation in the light of the gospel, to name its sins, and to seek the mercy of God, so that the commemoration of the Passion would, indeed, lead to a glorious resurrection for the community.

The withered fig tree

²⁰ *In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.*

²¹ *Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'*

²² *Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. ²³ Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.*

²⁴ *So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

²⁵ *Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*

[Some manuscripts add

²⁶But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses']

compare Matthew 21:18-22
verse 23 compare
Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:5-6
verse 25 compare
Matthew 6:14

After Jesus' symbolic and prophetic gesture demonstrating the judgment of God against the temple, Mark brings us back to the fig tree. It has 'withered to its roots', incapable of ever producing fruit again. The following words from Hosea come to mind:

Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up. They shall bear no fruit.

– Hosea 9:16

If the religious institution symbolised by the tree has failed to produce fruit, what is the alternative? Jesus' answer is immediate: 'Have faith in God'. This takes us right back to the first words spoken by Jesus in Mark's gospel: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and *believe* in the good news' (1:15). To have faith is to listen trustfully to God's word and to be *faithful* to it by acting upon it. This is the faith shown by the men who brought the paralysed man to Jesus (2:5). This is the faith shown by the woman suffering from haemorrhages (5:34). Jesus encouraged this faith in Jairus when news came that his daughter was dead (5:36). It was the lack of this faith that caused the disciples to be afraid that they would be overwhelmed by the forces of chaos symbolised by the raging sea (4:40). We recall the words of Jesus to the father of the epileptic boy: 'All things can be done for the one who believes'. Mark adds: 'and immediately the father of the child cried out: "I believe; help my unbelief!"' (9:23-24). It is faith, finally, that enables the disciple to 'regain his sight and follow Jesus on the way' (10:52). It is God who creates. It is God who gives life.

It is God who saves. With the temple closed and the fig tree withered, we are reminded that nothing can substitute for God, and nothing can mediate God without faith. In the period leading up to the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, the prophet Habakkuk could say:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

– Habakkuk. 3:17-19

In a similar way, the disciples of Jesus should not fear the collapse of the old institutions and the old forms. The good news, the wine of God's Spirit, needs 'fresh wineskins'(2:22), and God is faithful.

Linked with faith is prayer. Jesus has already spoken of the 'little ones who believe in me'(9:42), and of the need to 'receive the kingdom of God as a little child'(10:15). Here, he encourages in his disciples a simple prayer of trust (11:24). God is our Father-Mother, who delights in us (1:11) and cannot refuse a heart filled with faith. Jesus is not suggesting that we always have the wisdom to know what is best for us and to ask for what we really need, but he does assure us that God will answer the little ones who cry out to God in their need.

Finally, to faith and prayer is added forgiveness. Mark adds a saying that reminds us of the 'Our Father' (Matthew 6:12). The God to whom we are addressing our prayer in faith is the God of everyone. If we have hardened our heart against another person, the grace of God cannot penetrate our heart to heal and refresh us.

Faith

As a reflection on faith, the reader might find helpful a prayer written by my sister, Marie, before her untimely death from respiratory arrest in 1971. She entitled it 'In peace without fear'.

He is my centre of gravity,
In Him I live, move, and have my being.
There in deep darkness, in silent peace,
In beauty resplendent with vision that cannot see,
There I know God.
There I come forth from Him
In love that is also knowledge,
Tiny facet of His own love and knowledge of Himself.
He knows me! He loves me!
I rest in His embrace.
I come forth from Him instant by instant.
He creates me – minute by minute anew.
In Him I live and move,
In Him I have my being.
No need to prove to self, to others
What I am – what I can do.
Enough to be for him.
Enough to do for Him.
For He knows. He loves.
Coming forth from Him
I return to Him
In His own love, toward Himself.
There in deep darkness, in silent peace,
In beauty resplendent with vision that cannot see,
There I know God...
There I know myself.
My God, You are my Reality!
In You I can be myself
In peace. Without fear.
In joy.
For I am beautiful with Your Beauty,
And I live in Your embrace.

Where does religious authority lie?

In this and the other scenes after the emptying of the temple we find subtle claims that Jesus is the Messiah.

The authority with which Jesus speaks has been apparent from the beginning of the gospel:

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

– Mark 1:22

Mark 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 (1:7-8).

It is clear that those who claim religious authority lack it, 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

²⁷ *Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him*

²⁸ *and said 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?'*

²⁹ *Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.*

³⁰ *Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.'*

³¹ *They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?"'*

³² *But shall we say, "Of human origin"?' — they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet.*

³³ *So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'*

compare

Matthew 21:23-27

Luke 20:1-8

¹ Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

² When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. ³ But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

⁴ And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted.

⁵ Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed.

⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

⁷ But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'

⁸ So they seized him,

The mission of the beloved son

This is clearly a judgment on those who are responsible for carrying out God's will in caring for the community, but who are unfaithful to the covenant, who use God's gifts for their own advantage rather than in service of their Lord (compare Hosea 2:7-10; Ezekiel 16:15-19), and who 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 the 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 renewed Israel, the 'holy nation' (Exodus 19:6) — in other words the Christian Church (1 Peter 2:9) — will be the ones who carry on God's commission to give God the produce at the time of the harvest (21:41). The presence of Jews in the Church, and the continuing relationship between God and the people of Israel (see Romans 9-11), indicate that this is not meant as a rejection of Judaism. God is faithful to his promises, and the call to be a disciple goes out to all.

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

Included also in the parable (12:10) is a quotation from Psalm 118:22. The image is of a stone which is judged unsuitable for inclusion in a wall, but which is later found to be the perfect shape for the angle of the wall, and thus plays a critical role in shaping the whole building and holding it together. The application to Jesus is obvious, and the image is used elsewhere in the New Testament as shedding light for the early Christians on the mystery of Jesus’ rejection, crucifixion and glorification (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:6-8).

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

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. It is worth quoting at length:

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.

– 1 Peter 2:4-10

killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

⁹ What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”?

¹² When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

compare
Matthew 21:42-46
Luke 20:17-19

**¹³ Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ¹⁴ And they came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' ¹⁶ And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.'
¹⁷ Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'
And they were utterly amazed at him.**

compare Matthew 22:15-22
Luke 20:20-26

Jesus exposes hypocrisy

Those sent to trap Jesus represent the same parties which, earlier in the gospel, combined to find ways of destroying him (3:6). To understand why their question was indeed a trap, we need to recall the political situation at the time.

Herod the Great, an Idumean by birth, had won favour with the Emperor Octavian (Caesar Augustus), 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 (already mentioned in 6:17) took Galilee and Transjordan. Philip took the area north of Galilee (we mentioned him in relation to Caesarea Philippi, Mark 8:27). Archelaus took the largest area, comprising Judea, Idumaea and Samaria.

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 (procurator), who was directly answerable to the emperor, but was also connected in some way with the legate of the older, 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. In fact the Greek word translated 'tax' is *kensos*, a transliteration of the Latin *census*. Many Jews resented Roman occupation and the poll tax, and a Galilean called Judas (Acts 5:37) organised a resistance movement which was quickly suppressed.

The scene before us took place just before the feast of Passover. There were many Galileans among those gathering for the feast and 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: 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' 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'.

There is a certain irony in Jesus' question. They had attempted to flatter Jesus by saying to him: 'You show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.' Little did they realise how true their statement was: it applied even to him who was considered to be the most important man in the world!

They produce a coin, thus trapping themselves. If they really object to the coin, what are they doing with one? The Herodians, certainly, and probably a number of the Pharisees, as leaders in the community, have learned to benefit from the economic advantages of Roman occupation.

Jesus bypasses the question of tax and goes to the heart of the matter. If the coin they have belongs to the emperor, then let them give it back to the emperor. Their concern, however, must be to give God what belongs to God. The answer to their question, and to every other question in the complex arena of politics, will be found only if they 'do the will of God' (3:35).

In avoiding their trap, Jesus is not saying that their question is unimportant, nor is he denying the importance of politics. His own stance was quite political. He could see his people heading towards war and destruction (another gehenna) 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, therefore, 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 the religious leaders to give back whatever power they have that comes from the colonising power of Rome and to give to God 'the things that are God's.' He is speaking against Jewish compromise with paganism, whether by benefiting from the Roman system or by revolting against it. They are to love their enemies by obeying the mission given them by God to take knowledge of the true God to all the nations.

¹⁸ Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, ¹⁹“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that ‘if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.’

²⁰ There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; ²¹ and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; ²² none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. ²³ In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.’

²⁴ Jesus said to them, ‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵ For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

²⁶ And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? ²⁷ He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.’

compare Matthew 22:23-33
Luke 20:27-40

Jesus confronts the Sadducees

We will look first at who the Sadducees were, then at the precise nature of their question, and finally at Jesus’ reply.

In the absence of a king, the high priest 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, and it was they who 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 central constitution of Judaism: the Pentateuch. One such idea was that of the resurrection from the dead (Acts 23:8).

Traditionally, the Jews, like their neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld (Sheol: the Greek Hades). Here the dead person continued, but in an existence 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; see also Psalm 115:17 and
Isaiah 38:18-19

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow, and against all the evidence, 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 forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11; see also Psalm 49:15

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 to life after death 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 for God not to 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 continuance beyond death of the soul. The Pharisees and others believed that the whole human person in some way would be given fullness of life again by God. It is clear in the passage upon which we are commenting that the Sadducees are trying to be smart by showing 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 to have an heir to thwart it.

The Sadducees are wrong because they 'know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God'. God's power is such that, like the angels, those who are raised to life will never die. Furthermore, Jesus appeals to one of the central passages of the Scriptures acknowledged by the Sadducees (Exodus 3:6), and suggests that a more profound reading of the text points to the truth that the patriarchs are alive, not dead. His argument is simple and direct: God is 'the God not of the dead but of the living'.

The central place of love

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' 29 Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'

32 Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

compare Matthew 22:34-40
Luke 10:25-42

The scribe agrees with Jesus, because Jesus' reply expresses traditional wisdom. The first commandment, called the Shema' after its first word in Hebrew, is found in Deuteronomy, where it is followed by the injunction:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:6-9

It was a pious practice to wear a small container called a phylactery which contained this text. It was worn on the forehead as a reminder to keep it always before one's eyes. It was worn on the arm as a reminder to act always in accordance with it. A mezuzah which contained the text of the Shema' was also hung at the entrance to the home.

The importance of the second commandment, which is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18, is borne out by the following tradition concerning Rabbi Hillel the Elder who died when Jesus was in his early teens. Asked to give a summary of the Law, he replied:

What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbours. This is the whole Law, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

– The Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbath* 31a

The first commandment defines 'love' as understood by Jesus. It is first and foremost that which characterises God's relationship with us: a relationship expressed by the redemption effected through Moses, and now by the redemption effected through Jesus (see 1John 4:8-10). It is this love which makes possible in us a wholehearted response of love to God, and it is this wholehearted response to God that flows over into our relationships with others.

The New Testament frequently stresses the importance of love of neighbour:

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

– Galatians 5:14

The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

– Romans 13:9

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

_ James 2:8

Love of God, that is to say, a commitment to listen to God's word and to obey his will, makes possible a love of others that transcends natural friendship, convenience and self-interest. Love of others is the test of the reality of one's love of God. As John says:

Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

– 1John 4:20

In his response, the scribe picks up one of the main themes of the prophetic tradition:

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

– Hosea 6:6

Jesus' final remark takes us back to the first scene in Mark's gospel. Jesus belongs to the spiritual heritage of Israel. This scribe, therefore, is 'not far away from the kingdom of God'. He has but to take one last step: to become a disciple of him who not only fulfils the Law and the prophets but transcends them in a way that no student of the Law could ever imagine. Mark is no doubt continuing in the tradition of Paul: keeping open the invitation to the Jews to join the Christian community, and hoping for the day when Israel will be grafted back into the olive (Romans 11:23).

Mark is faithful to Deuteronomy in stating that the first commandment is to 'Hear', to listen. We are not the source of love. For us it is always primarily a response. In New Testament terms, the first commandment is, as Jesus says, to 'repent, and believe in the good news' (1:15). That is to say, to listen to God as Jesus listened to God at the baptism, and to believe that God loves us as his beloved children. It is this faith that will allow God's own love to be 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). And it is this love that will flow back to God and out to everyone, for everyone is loved by God.

³⁵ *While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?*

³⁶ *David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet."*

³⁷ *David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?'*

And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

compare
Matthew 22:41-46
Luke 20:41-44

The true nature of the Messiah

Jesus has responded to three questions posed as a test by those who refused to accept him. Now, it is his turn to put a question to them, and it concerns his Messianic identity. They assume that the Messiah is the 'son of David', a title which is echoed in the words with which the crowds greeted Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem (11:10; see 10:47).

As in the previous three scenes, so here, Jesus' response forces his listeners to examine their assumptions and invites them to a deeper level of understanding. By quoting Psalm 110:1 (12:36), in which the term 'lord' is used of the king, Jesus wants to focus the attention of the Pharisees on the Messiah's relationship to God. It is clear 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).

Psalm 110 also speaks of the priesthood of Melchizedek and not that of Levi. Jesus is confronting the priestly regime. The enthroned Messiah is their judge.

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

The Christian claims concerning Jesus, while transcending the expectations of Judaism, are consistent, as in Psalm 110, with its deepest aspirations.

Jesus' judgment of the scribes

Tragically, this is Jesus' final 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 as revealed by Jesus himself.

The comma after 'scribes' in verse 36, gives the impression that Jesus is generalising and condemning all the scribes. This is wrong. He is telling his disciples to beware of those scribes who behave in the way he is describing.

³⁸ As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour wid-ows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

compare
Matthew 23:1,5-7
Luke 20:45-47

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, *which are worth a penny.* [‘quadrans’, a Roman coin]

43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in *everything she had*, all she had to live on.’

compare Luke 24:1-4

The nature of true discipleship

This scene is capable of two quite conflicting interpretations. If we look at it as a straightforward narrative, then, especially in the light of the immediate context, we would see it as an extension and illustration of the criticism Jesus has just levelled at the scribes who ‘devour widow’s houses’ (12:40). 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 rejected (11:16), and which will soon be ‘thrown down’ (13:2).

The scene, however, can be taken another way. Mark, in an earlier section, made much of the narrative of the loaves (6:32-44 and 8:1-10). 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. Having shown the emptiness of the religion of the scribes, could it be that Jesus is presenting this poor widow as a contrasting example of someone who gives all she has, little though it be, to the temple treasury – a symbol for the ‘house of prayer for all the nations’ (11:17): the community of faith which Jesus himself was calling together?

This is Mark’s final portrait before the ‘eschatological discourse’ (Mark 13) and the narrative of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. We would expect Mark 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, everyone 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.

PART B: God's judgment of human history (13:1-37)

An introduction to Mark chapter thirteen is necessary, for it is apparent that it is written in a literary style that is unlike anything else in the gospel. Furthermore, to this point Mark has given us only short sayings of Jesus which, for the most part, function as comments on Jesus' action. In chapter thirteen we suddenly have a whole chapter that is presented as a teaching of Jesus.

Mark has one final theme which he wishes to present before focusing our attention on Jesus' death and resurrection. Having completed his treatment of discipleship, he has just portrayed Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem as a confrontation with the religious leaders. He has shown that 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 Mark 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.

Throughout his gospel, Mark 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. Here, in this final discourse, Mark reflects on the truth that history will be judged on the way each generation responds 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. They believed that it was the Lord who, again and again in their history, 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).

The eschatological discourse

Catastrophes in their history were also understood as ‘days of the Lord’, for 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).

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, Mark 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.

The presence of Jesus, the Son of Man, to each person, when our present experience has reached its term, is called the ‘coming’, or the ‘presence’ (Greek *parousia*) of the Son of Man. It will happen to each of us. It will happen to all of us. The whole of human history as we know it will be judged by this encounter, for Jesus reveals who God truly is and how we, as human beings, are to respond to God. There are two technical words which are used in describing this discourse: ‘eschatological’ and ‘apocalyptic’. The first has to do with content; the second with style.

‘Eschatological’ is a word taken over from the Greek *eschata*, meaning ‘the final things’. This section is sometimes referred to as the ‘eschatological discourse’, because, as we have just noted, it is concerned with God’s ultimate judgment of human history. ‘Apocalyptic’ is a word taken over from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning ‘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 — literature which focuses attention on the way in which God will intervene decisively to bring about the fulfilment of his promises and bring the history of Israel to its climax.

Mark 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.

The coming destruction of the temple

Mark takes us back to the 'Mount of Olives' (see 11:1), and so to the theme of judgment associated with it (see Zechariah 14:4). On one side of the stage stands the temple, which Jesus has prophetically rejected, and 'opposite the temple' Jesus the teacher is seated with his first four disciples (see 1:16-20).

The failure of the temple authorities to accept the gospel has fixed them on a path of destruction. 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 destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD as the consequence of the failure of its people to heed the word of peace preached to them by Jesus. Mark begins Jesus' 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.

Jesus' disciples want to know when the temple will be destroyed and the signs that will warn them. This sets the scene for Mark's reflection on God's judgment of history.

¹ As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'

² Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,

⁴ 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'

compare Matthew 24:1-3
Luke 21:5-7

⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray.

⁶ Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.

⁷ When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

compare Luke 21:8-9

A warning against being deceived by false messiahs

Mark warns his community, as Jesus warned his disciples, not to be surprised at the emergence of false messiahs. We find evidence of this emergence in other documents of the New Testament (see 2Thessalonians 2:3-12; 1John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2John 7; Revelation 13:4-18). They are not to be frightened by the alarmist predictions uttered in God's name by such false prophets.

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 Mark mentions here as what they claim to be sure indications. Mark 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

Jesus' disciples believed that he had inaugurated the new creation. One can readily sense their 'alarm' when, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the old patterns of war, earthquake and famine continued as though nothing had happened. Mark attempts to encourage his community not to lose heart.

These are, indeed, painful happenings, but they are but 'the beginning of the 'birthpangs'. Life can come from these sufferings, just as it came from the sufferings of Jesus. The new creation has been realised in Jesus. It is only in process for the world, and if sufferings are borne patiently and in faith they can be the pangs of a new birth. Mark is drawing on imagery such as the following from Isaiah:

O Lord, in distress they sought you, they poured out a prayer when your chastening was on them. Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O Lord.

– Isaiah 26:16-17

⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.

compare
Matthew 24:7
Luke 21:10-11

⁹ As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.

¹⁰ *And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.*

¹¹ When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

¹² Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;

¹³ and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

compare Matthew 10:17-22
Luke 21:12-19

A warning to expect persecution

We have seen Jesus rejected by the religious leaders of his own people, and we will see him shortly being rejected also by the Roman authorities. Jesus warns his disciples to expect similar treatment.

The rejection of Jesus cannot thwart God's will to save, nor can the rejection of the disciples finally thwart their mission. For 'the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations'. In the meantime they will suffer as Jesus suffered before them. Some of this suffering, tragically, will come from divisions within the Christian community.

The 'Holy Spirit' that sustained Jesus will sustain them. God will speak through them. Their suffering, like that of Jesus, can be an instrument for the proclaiming of the good news. Mark's theme is the basic theme of all eschatological writings:

The one who endures to the end will be saved.

– see Revelation 13:10; 14:12

The warnings have a special poignancy when we remember the terrible treatment of Christians in Rome in the persecution of Nero after the great fire of 64AD, and realise that Mark is writing probably during the early stages of the Roman-Jewish war (66-73AD). It is likely that the following passage, set in Judea, draws on the experiences of that war.

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

The expression ‘desolating sacrilege’ is borrowed from 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). Mark may have a specific incident in mind, like the time the emperor Tiberius sent Pilate an image of himself to be set up in the temple¹. Alternatively, he may be applying the expression ‘desolating sacrilege’ to all the acts of desecration that happen in a time of violence and persecution.

The plight of the fugitives created by such violence is graphically portrayed in the extreme language typical of this form of literature. Jesus speaks of ‘suffering such as has not been from the beginning of creation that God created until now, no, and never will be’. The prophet Joel uses similar language when he speaks of:

a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

– Joel 2:2; see also Daniel 12:1; 1Mac 9:27

Mark reminds his readers that, horrible as things can be, everything does come within the providence of the all-powerful God, and ‘God has cut short those days’. Whatever suffering they may endure as a result of the action of evil, there is an over-arching providence which is caring for those whom God has chosen. The ultimate proof of this is about to be given in the resurrection of Jesus.

See Josephus *The Jewish War*, quoted Eusebius *History of the Church* 2.6.

¹⁴ **‘But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains;**

¹⁵ **the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away;**

¹⁶ **the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat.**

¹⁷ **Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!**

¹⁸ **Pray that it may not be in winter.**

¹⁹ **For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.**

²⁰ **And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days.**

compare Matthew 24:15-22
Luke 21:20-24

²¹ **And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!' — do not believe it.**
²² **False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.**
²³ **But be alert; I have already told you everything.**

compare Matthew 24:23-25

False Messianic claims

Mark repeats, in an expanded form, his earlier warning (13:5-6). It is clear from other books of the New Testament that the problem of discerning true from false prophecy was a major one in the period of heightened expectation just after the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul tells the community in Thessalonica not to quench the Spirit, and not to despise prophesying. However, he goes on to warn them to 'test everything' and to hold fast only to what is good (1Thessalonians 5:19-22). He returns to the problem with greater urgency in his Second Letter (2:1-15), and concludes by urging them to 'hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us' (2Thessalonians 2:15).

He tells the community in Corinth that when prophets speak, the others are to 'weigh what is said' (1Corinthians 14:29). In his Letter to the Roman community he writes: 'I warn you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them' (Romans 16:17). The warnings become more urgent in the later works of the New Testament (1Timothy 4:1-5; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 1John 4:1; 2Peter 2:1-3; Revelation 2:20).

The presence of the Son of Man affects the whole of creation

Mark paints a picture of the 'final judgment', that is to say of the ultimate significance of our human existence and of how our lives are ultimately judged. The images come from Isaiah. 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 ... 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 have nothing to fear from God's judgment, because Jesus, the Son of Man will be there, and those who have 'endured to the end'(13:13) will all be gathered to him. These are those who have mourned for him as the people mourned the death of king Josiah (see Zechariah 12:10-14). Their hearts were moved by his death and they repented. Jesus has been raised 'with power and great glory'. His true disciples will share in this. Perhaps the best commentary on 'the sign of the Son of Man [that] will appear in the heaven' is found in the symbolic portrait of the risen and glorious Christ found in the Book of Revelation:

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

– Revelation 1:7

Mark quotes (13:26) from Daniel 7:13) and brings to a climax his description of Jesus as the Son of Man. We refer the reader to the commentary on Mark 2:1-12 and 8:31-32a. For those with eyes to see, this vision is realised on Calvary, for, as Jesus goes on to say in the following passage, 'you will see these things taking place'. It is in Jesus' manner of dying that God's final judgment on humankind is revealed as one that offers salvation.

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. ... 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

²⁴ **'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.**

compare
Matthew 24:29-31
Luke 21:25-28

God's final judgment is imminent

²⁸ 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

The destruction of the temple (13:2) will happen within their generation; the deception, the violence, the persecution, and the sacrilege ('these things', 13:29) are about to take place in the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. They will be able to see it all for themselves.

Mark seems already to be presenting a theology of the cross that will be developed strongly by John who sees the cross as Jesus' hour of glory. Those who look with the eyes of faith will see there the 'Son of Man coming in great power and glory', for God is revealing there God's ultimate judgment upon humankind, and, 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.

The final manifestation of the effects of the redemption in the consummation of the new heavens and the new earth — that is something known only to 'the Father'. However, Peter does encourage the Christian community to hasten the fulfilment of God's promised paradise by the holiness of their lives:

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 24:32-36
Luke 21:29-33

All must face God's judgment

Jesus' faith in God is about to be put to the test in his agony, passion and death. Mark is writing to a community that has experienced persecution and martyrdom. Each disciple will have to face the trial that sorts out his or her true relationship with Jesus. His final advice is repeated like a refrain in this concluding passage: 'keep alert', 'keep awake', 'keep awake'. We are called to carry out faithfully the will of our Lord, always vigilant, ready to open the door whenever he comes.

³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

³⁵ Therefore, keep awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'