

Notes on Matthew Chapters 24 and 25

Jesus says that the seven-fold woes from Chapter 23 will come upon “this generation.” A generation is defined as 40 years. He tells Jerusalem “your house [the Temple] is desolate.” In the Babylonian Captivity, not only were the Jewish people led away, but the sacred vessels of the Temple were also carried away, but there is no evidence of their return, so the Temple is desolate. The Temple is where God dwelt among his people, but now his absence is felt. Old Testament prophets had foretold a time when the presence of God would leave the Temple and go to the Mount of Olives. Jesus physically leaves the Temple in Mt. 24:1-3 and goes to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus spends these two chapters talking about the end of an age. The disciples are curious about this and ask him to tell them when it will come and how they will know it. He promises them, “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Mt. 24:34. He tells them of all the signs and events that must come before the end. Vv. 5-14. “When you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” V. 15. Daniel had spoken of the sacrilege in which the Temple would be destroyed. Daniel Chapter 9.

Matthew 24 is often interpreted as a sign of the end of time. But the key to understanding this chapter is to see it in reference to the events of 70 A.D., one generation after he has spoken these words. In 70 A.D. the Roman general Titus destroys the Temple and with it all of Jerusalem. Josephus records that 1.2 million Jews were slaughtered. About 250,000 lived in Jerusalem, so many of those killed must have come to Jerusalem from all over the world for Passover. But not one follower of Christ is said to have been killed. Why? Because they listened to the words of Jesus and fled to the hills, across the river to modern-day Jordan. (Mt. 24:16: “Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains.”) This led to a sharp split between the Nazarenes (followers of Christ) and the mainline Jews in 90 A.D., resulting in the adoption in the synagogues of the Heretics’ Benediction, actually a ritual curse on Christians because they had fled Jerusalem and had not participated in the fight against Rome in 70 A.D.

There are several ways to understand these passages about the close of the age. This does not necessarily mean that we are living at the end of time. The preterist view holds that these things have already taken place. The futurist view states that, in a spiritual sense, these are predictions of things to come. The disciples ask Jesus about the signs of his coming, in Greek, “parousia,” meaning “coming” or “presence.” Does this question, and Jesus’ response, refer to the events of 70 A.D. or the eventual end of the world?

Acts 2:17 says that “God will pour out his Spirit in the last days,” echoing the same statement in the Book of Joel in the Old Testament. Peter took this to mean that his times were the last days of *something*. Was it the last days of time, or the last days of a period of time? Hebrews 1:1-2: “In these last days, [God] spoke to us through a son.” This is not a reference to the end of time, but to the end of the old covenant. Eph. 2:4-7 speaks of “coming ages,” so this is not the final age. The old covenant has passed away; this is the dawn of the Messianic Age.

The problem with the popular view that Jesus is speaking of the end of the world is that he is saying that all of this must take place in “this generation.” Jesus is not speaking from a “Left Behind” perspective, but from imagery in the Old Testament. Jesus is borrowing cosmic imagery from the Old Testament when he says that the sun will be darkened and the moon will not shed its light. Chapters 13, 19 and 34 of Isaiah use similar images in foretelling the exile of the North and the coming exile of Judah, along with the defeat of Babylon by Persia and the downfall of Egypt. Each of these spelled the end of an age, a great downfall, a political, military or social change. We are not accustomed to the Hebrew imagery used here, and we should not take it literally. It is metaphorical, much as we would say, “I turned out his lights” or “I cleaned his clock,” meaning “I beat him severely” and not “I extinguished his lamps” or “I dusted his timepiece.” The ancients told time by the sun, the moon and the stars, so to say that these heavenly bodies turned dark was to say that a time period had ended.

Jesus’ predictions were so accurate that some theologians say that the Gospel of Matthew must have been written in retrospect after 70 A.D., looking back on what had happened and then attributing to Jesus the prophecy of these events. But the Church holds that the gospel was written before 70 A.D., because there is no reference to the actual destruction of the Temple. If that had actually occurred when Matthew wrote, wouldn’t he have made some mention of it?

The sayings and events of Matthew 24 do speak of what has already taken place with the end of the old covenant and the beginning of the new, but they also speak in a spiritual sense of the end of the world. What was the Temple a sign of? It was built in seven years, and the tabernacle was built in seven days. The world was created in seven days. The Temple was a symbol of creation, a microcosm of the world itself. The destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. prefigures the judgment that will come upon the whole world at the end of time. We are going to go through the same thing that the Temple underwent: we are going to die, but if we are faithful we will rise to new life, in the same way that Jesus died and rose to new life, and he becomes the Temple that we dwell in. The New Testament age will pass away, and we will live with Christ forever.

Jesus warns people about judgment: “Watch, therefore....” He has come to us in the past, and we must discern his coming in the present to avoid judgment. He will come to judge in the future as well. In his coming in the past he has passed judgment on Jerusalem. In his present coming (the parousia) he comes in the Eucharist, and we must discern and respect this to avoid death and judgment. The future coming is the General Judgment at the end of time. We must be watchful and we cannot lose our attention. See Catechism Par. 1021 (particular judgment) and Par. 1038 (Last Judgment).

Jesus warns us that our temples, our bodies, will be torn down, and we will face judgment, so we must be watchful. One of the ways we must be watchful is in the Mass. When we hear “Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord” and the words of Consecration, “This is My Body,” we kneel because we see that the Lord is becoming really present in the Eucharist, the “parousia.”