

Andrew (our Carey College summer student), I don't know what they told you at Carey this year but one of the best pieces of advice I ever got was to prepare messages with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other (of course this only applies if it's the Otago Daily Times as you'll discover). It's a metaphor of course and it's quite difficult to do. How do you hold a pen when one hand has the Bible and one the newspaper? And now with a Bible in one hand, a cell phone in the other, my laptop in front of me, the paper nearby and the Listener somewhere on the table, it's hard to juggle all this information.

On Monday morning I read a considered comment on the plight of Asia Bibi.

8 or so years ago, Asia, in the true spirit of Jesus offered a cup of cold water to someone who'd been working in the fields – totally innocent you might think. Well something wasn't quite right, a woman said "anything from the hand of a Christian woman was unclean." Words were spoken, and mother of 5, Asia, has spent the last 8 years in prison having been found guilty of blasphemy.

On 31 October she was released by an edict of the Supreme Court. Her release provoked much civil unrest. Roads were blocked in major cities and calls were made for the Supreme Court justices to be assassinated. You might like to compare that situation with the righteous anger of the Opposition over the granting of residency to a man in prison. It will be interesting to see how that one plays out. I offer no opinion other than to say it's best to read all that you claim to have read. However, that's not the end of the matter. Such is the opposition to her being released that the great cricketer Imran Khan, now Pakistan's Prime Minister, is reconsidering – so I read on Thursday from the Daily Mirror

Asia Bibi's experience was in my mind as I read today's Bible passage.

Luke 21:5-19: Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, 6 'As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.'

7 'Teacher,' they asked, 'when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?'

8 He replied: 'Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. 9 When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.'

10 Then he said to them: 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.'

12 'But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. 13 And so you will bear testimony to me. 14 But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. 15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17 Everyone will hate you because of me. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 Stand firm, and you will win life.'

This is Luke's passage for the second Sunday before Advent. Next week, on Christ the King Sunday, Andrew will take us to the door of the Advent season.

The disciples, like us, are anxious to know how this whole event is going to play out. Even if they didn't understand everything, they must have understood that not everyone saw Jesus as they did, not everyone was enamoured by his teaching and his work. He's thrown out enough hints already pointing to trouble, and then he makes this outrageous statement

'As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.'

When, what?

.... **'when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?'**

Before we examine Jesus' response let me say that undergirding his words are four allied ideas:

1. The Jewish view of history - two ages, this present age and the age to come. In between the two was **the day of the Lord**. The day of the Lord would be a time of cosmic upheaval and destruction; the desperate birth-pangs of the new age
2. The fall of Jerusalem
3. The persecution to come
4. Jesus' return, his second coming

When we read this passage, we can see parts of all these things. Jesus warns of three issues:

A. WATCH OUT YOU ARE NOT DECEIVED

To illustrate: there's one thing happening in a stream of the Christian church today that may be unprecedented in Church History – Jesus is presented as the end of our troubles, the solution to our problems, the way to make happy people even happier.

- Are you anxious, fearful about tomorrow, wondering how you're going to make ends meet, how your kids will turn out, what growing old will look like? Come to Jesus he'll fix all that.
- Have you had a rough week, things not so good at work, problems at school, challenges you don't know how to meet. Come to Jesus, he'll fix all that.
- Are you ill, facing health crises that cause you worry and pain, wondering what's ahead? Come to Jesus he'll fix that.
- Are you looking for stability in a rapidly changing world, do you need rest the reassurance that things will stay the same and you'll be in control? Come to Jesus, he'll fix that.

You might think such therapeutic teaching is the gospel. Maybe the gospel **is** a technique for getting whatever you think you need to see you through the night; maybe the good news of Jesus Christ **is** a technique for bringing you peace in a restless world and a chaotic, frightening culture.

You might get away with it too, if it wasn't for the Bible, for Jesus and for today's reading. I've only mentioned one line of deception – there are plenty?

Tamsyn Parker from the New Zealand Herald wrote this week. **'One in three Kiwis say they have been a victim of a scam or fraud. Research by Westpac Bank has found 90 per cent of people fear being scammed or defrauded and a third say they have been.'**

Tiffany Ryan, Westpac New Zealand's head of financial crime and security, said most scams go unreported. 'But there are industry estimates that New Zealanders may be losing up to \$500 million each year to cybercrime and scams run through email, phone calls, text, mail, and door knocks.'

Deception, deception, deception – at the church we've had our share of deception coming through emails. We've been told by email that we've been visiting pornography sites and that a camera has been watching us do naughty things etc., etc. And if we pay so much in bitcoin, we'll be home free. Trouble is neither my computer nor the office computer has a camera. Big brother must indeed be watching. Other common deceptions are:

- If only I had this, that or the other thing – the deception of wealth
- I can do what I want, God will forgive me – the lie
- It doesn't matter whether I worship with others - unbiblical
- If only I could have a relationship with that woman, that man (a highly respected and effective American church leader has been caught by that deception), seems it's been going on for a long time.
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Deception comes in many shapes and forms; deception wears many faces. Jesus didn't say we're to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves for nothing.

The deception issues Jesus raises are:

- Many will come in my name claiming they are me or at least have a hot line to me – how long have you got to discuss that?
- 'The time is near' – I've heard so many sermons in my short life about the time being near, and the signs it's about to happen. **Jesus said he didn't know but apparently some do.** Just remember, the time for us is nearer than it was before we came this morning!

NOTE: JESUS SAID THIS WOULD HAPPEN

B. THERE WILL BE PERSECUTION

There will be troubles – religious and political. This could include seizing us, persecuting us and putting us in prison. Persecution - hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs. We were reminded on Tuesday about the hit squads in Asian countries who set out to kill Christians.

Now as we sit here today in comfort and relative safety, it seems this feels utterly irrelevant. Well it's not for many Christians – its life and death stuff. **AND NOTE: JESUS SAID THIS WOULD HAPPEN!** When he didn't say, how he didn't say but he did make some encouraging statements to those caught in such situations:

- You will bear testimony to him
- Don't worry about what to say - he will give you words and wisdom
- You will be betrayed by family and friends
- Some of you will die
- Everyone will hate you because of him
- Stand firm and you will win life

All this came a bit clearer to me on Tuesday when quite a few heard Leor Sharkar. He lives in a country where Christians make up 0.4% of the population, where it's not popular to be Christian where Christians suffer in all kinds of ways simply because they're Christians.

I recognise there are some among us who've been treated abysmally especially if they're the only Christian in their family; some experience ridicule in the work place and others are put down in the school context.

REMEMBER, JESUS SAID THIS WOULD HAPPEN!

C. THERE WILL BE TROUBLES

Wars, uprisings, conflict – nations and kingdoms, earthquakes, famines, pestilences; fearful events and great signs from heaven – one can think about the fires in California – how terrifying that must have been; or acts of terrorism on the streets of Melbourne just to provide two recent examples. **NOTE: JESUS SAID THIS WOULD HAPPEN!**

So, what do you believe? Have you brought into the deception that Jesus came to make our reasonably good lives better and to make sure we don't suffer the things he said his followers would. Or have you cut these verses out of your bible – too challenging, too demanding?

When the twin towers fell in 2001, many in America were shaken to the core. Their desire for a secure and peaceful world ended. Amid the trauma, many churches experiences increased attendance. Americans were hurting. They came to churches in their tens of thousands seeking comfort and consolation, and many found it. Within a few months, however the bump in church participation was over; the people who showed up after 9/11 appeared to go back to living without church.

Why? Maybe they were looking for easy comfort, immediate comfort and found Jesus, Sure Jesus comforts but he also gives as assignments, he calls us to serve to focus less on our own troubles and more on the troubles of others; and maybe even to suffer for Jesus sake, Jesus' name!

An update on Asia Bibi (Monday 19th November):

She is in hiding in Pakistan
Extremists want her to be publicly hanged
Several countries have offered her asylum
Watch this space