

# As It All Comes Crashing Down

A sermon on Mark 13 & Hebrews 10:19-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 November 2018

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## Message

The collapse of the institutional church and other social structures will be painful for all of us, but it is not ultimately a threat to mission of Jesus.

## Sermon

I'm going to try a somewhat different style for tonight's sermon, because the reading we heard from Mark's gospel is a change of style for his gospel. Imagine if you were reading a historical novel and suddenly there was a science fiction chapter in the middle of it. It's a bit like that. It's disorienting. Historical novels and science fiction don't just have different subject matter, they have a different styles of language and different sorts of imagery. When you are reading, you instinctively adjust your mind to the different types of literature.

So here at this point in Mark's gospel (and Matthew and Luke follow suit) we suddenly come across a chapter of apocalyptic material, and we have adjust our minds accordingly. The book of Revelation is the best known example of biblical apocalyptic literature, but there is more in some of the prophets, especially in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, and there are these apocalyptic chapters in three of the gospels.

So I want to attempt a similar shift of style and see if we can discover the power of Jesus's use of this style by immersing ourselves in it for a few minutes. And to do that, I want to steal an idea from one of Brian McLaren's books. A few years back, he published two books on the same topic, but one written as a short novel, and the other as a popular theological textbook. I recommend them both, but the novel, *The Girl with the Dove Tattoo*, is the one I'm borrowing the idea from.

The premise of the novel is that Jesus, Mohammed, Moses and the Buddha turn up in today's world, working together to try to get their message of peace and reconciliation and cooperation through to the hostile religious movements that bear their names. So I want to spin that idea in another direction and imagine what this apocalyptic chapter of the gospel might have sounded like if Jesus had been around today and responding to events in today's world. I'm going to take the whole thirteenth chapter of Mark, not just the little bit we heard before. So, fasten your seatbelts and here we go.

In late November 2018, Jesus and some friends visited Melbourne. None of the religious leaders agreed to meet them, so their visit was mostly just tourism, getting the feel of the city. Curious about the religious life of the city, they included the major sacred sites: St Patrick's Cathedral, St Paul's Cathedral, and the MCG. Late in the afternoon, they were standing in Federation Square looking back at St Paul's Cathedral, and Jesus's friends were gushing about all they had seen inside. "Wow! It's quite something, that place, isn't it? How about all that ornate stonework? It's not as big as some of the ones we saw in Europe, but it is also not as cluttered and overdone. There's an imposing austerity about it that just blows you away, doesn't it? It's one of a kind! It really gives you a sense of the grandeur and permanence of the Church, doesn't it?"

But Jesus said, “Pfff! The grandeur and permanence of the Church?! The whole thing is coming crashing down. This one and the other one up the road too. And the rest of them. There will be nothing left of their sacred grandeur and power and prestige but heaps of rubble. Even now the cracks are opening up and all they’re doing is desperately trying to paper over them. They don’t even realise how sick the systems they’ve created are, and now it’s all coming down around their ears with an earth-shattering crash.”

Later that evening, they were sitting at an outdoor table in a bustling laneway, enjoying pizza and glass of red, and they began to ask Jesus to expand on what he had said. “When do you reckon these things are going to happen?” they asked. “Is it all planned? Will there be any secret warning signs we can be watching out for? What will tip us off? Can you give us any inside information?”

Jesus shook his head laughing and launched into an answer, saying: “Don’t get caught up in all that rubbish! Don’t go falling for the doomsday enthusiasts who reckon there is a secret plan in everything and a code to be cracked that will map it all out. There’s always going to be crazies bobbing up and saying, ‘Follow me! I’m the One who knows! I’ve cracked the secret code of the Book of Revelation and I can guide you safely through the terrors to come.’ Whatever happens, they reckon it is part of the plan they’ve read in the tea leaves of their bibles.”

“Far too many gullible people get sucked into their madness,” Jesus went on. “Every time there’s something serious in the news, these fanatics crank up the speculation again. A tsunami wipes out several towns in Indonesia, a few nations talk about moving their Israeli embassies to Jerusalem, North Korea may or may not be closing down its nuclear weapons program, Emmanuel Macron crushes Donald Trumps hand in a brutal handshake, and these nutters reckon its all connected and they know what it all means.

“Just because some things are related doesn’t mean that they are all part of a calculated plan. You all saw that mountain of flowers outside that cafe back there in Bourke Street, didn’t you? The owner of that cafe got killed nearby a couple of weeks back by a religious crazy who thought he was on a mission from God. Sure, you can see connections with similar things happening all over the world, but there is no plan. Just a bunch of crazy loners reading the same news and then doing similar crazy things. Don’t imagine its bigger or more coordinated than it is.

“Keep your cool. These things will happen, as they always have, but they don’t mean that time’s up. People have been making such predictions since the beginning of time, and they’re always wrong. Saint Augustine said that when the barbarians were invading the Roman provinces, everyone thought it was a sign of the end times, and how many more times has it happened since then?”

Jesus poured another glass of wine and continued, “Nations will set out to destroy each other; there will be ethnic conflicts and civil wars; fortified borders; there will be horrendous natural disasters; millions of people will be living in poverty and facing starvation. This is not new and, sadly, it will not be the end. But it is a bit like a woman going into labour. The world is shuddering in intense labour pains as it struggles to bring a new age to birth.

“Watch out for yourselves, because this is going to be a very painful time for anyone who is associated with me. As the institutional church plunges into chaos and scandal and it all comes crashing down, everyone who has any sort of link to the church is going to get caught in the crossfire. This is unavoidable. The world will look at the failures and scandals and corruption of the Church and they will blame me. They will say that it proves that following me is foolish and unhealthy and dangerous to children and society.

“They will harass you and ridicule you and batter you with questions about why you would continue to have anything to do with such a corrupt religious fantasy. Your continued faith will offend them and infuriate them. It is an opportunity to show them the contrast between the gospel of love and mercy and the corrupt structures of power and control, but don’t expect them to like it.

“And don’t go planning for it, or trying to prepare what you’re going to say in advance either. That would just tempt you to start seeing conspiracies and plots everywhere you look. Just continue living your lives right, in love and mercy and openness, and be yourselves. It is how you live, not what you say that will best show what I mean to you, so don’t worry about it. Let the Holy Spirit do her job of defending me. You’re only witnesses, so all you have to say is what you have experienced yourself.”

Jesus went on, “It will get nasty at times. Families will be torn apart over this when one member wants to follow me and another thinks that believing in me is the root of all evil. They will be filled with hate and scream at you that aligning yourself with me makes you a culpable accomplice of child abusers and rapists and all manner of corruption and cover-ups. Hang in there, and let your lives be your witness.

“But if it gets to the stage where the Church itself starts responding with hostility and violent hateful outbursts and it starts claiming that God wants vengeance on his enemies and asking you to pledge your allegiance to the fight, then it’s probably time to cut and run. If Church leaders start declaring that anyone who attacks them is attacking God and claiming the divine right to retaliate against those they have declared to be God’s enemies, then they’ve really lost the plot and things are spiralling out of control.

“Don’t waste time trying to see what can be salvaged. Just get the hell out of there. Sure you’ll have to leave behind some things that have been precious to you, but there will be no time to lose. Get out fast, because the whole thing will be on the verge of exploding into a fiery hell of hatred, recriminations, and bloodshed. It will be a worse trauma than anything anyone has ever known before, and if God does not step in and intervene in a major way, there will be nothing and no one left at the end of it all.

“Don’t get carried away with inflated speculation about world leaders either. Half of America thinks Donald Trump is the messiah, and the other half thinks he’s the antichrist. He’s really not that important. Other countries have their own versions. And in this country we’re visiting here, the politicians are so unimportant that they seem to have turned their prime ministerial lodge into some kind short term AirBnB rental.

“People will start pointing out not only politicians, but various celebrities, preachers or archbishops and claiming them as the anointed one, the one who has been touched by God for this special time to lead us to safety. All kinds of false messiahs and false prophets will have

their ways of winning everyone's allegiance and leading everyone astray. Stay awake and on your guard. I've already told you all you need to know, so don't go running after those who claim to have the missing piece."

After pausing for another mouthful of pizza, Jesus gestured back towards the cathedral and said, "As the end approaches, there will be a time of great chaos and trauma on the earth. Things will keep getting worse and it will seem as though the whole cosmos is going berserk. For many of those who have trusted so completely in the Church and its leaders, it will seem like the sun has gone black; the moon will not shine; the stars are coming crashing to earth. It will be like their whole world has been knocked off its foundations.

"Only when everything anybody ever put their trust in – money, power, nation and religion – lies completely ruined will everyone begin to see the new thing that is happening, the breathtaking arrival of the New Human, riding on the clouds, dazzling with love and grace and unquenchable forgiveness. Only then will people gather to him from every direction, from the most far flung corners of the earth to the furthest reaches of heaven, drawn like moths to a flame to the pure and powerful love and mercy that will no longer be obscured by the corrupt apparatus of the religious establishment.

"Take a lesson from the trees. Many of them give clear signs when the seasons are changing. Those bottle brushes in the Botanic Gardens were bursting into bloom as a sign that summer is arriving here. This is much the same. When you see all these things happening you can be sure that the things I've always been on about are finally rising to the surface and I'm on the move. The fact of the matter is that some of you will see these things in your own lifetime. The earth and the sky have use-by dates, but what I'm telling you here will stand forever.

"But just when that day and hour will come, God only knows. The angels of heaven don't know and not even the Son knows. No one knows. So watch out; keep yourselves on the alert, because you have no way of knowing when the time will come. It is like an employer going off on leave. He gives all his staff tasks to work at in his absence, and leaves them to get on with it. He tells the leading hand to keep an eye out for his return. So keep your wits about you and don't slack off, because you have no way of knowing when the boss will be back. It could be any time of the day or night, and you don't want to be caught asleep in his chair with your boots on his desk.

"So what I am telling you is exactly the same as what I am telling everybody else: there is only one game plan, love, love and more love. Forgive, forgive and more love. Keep yourselves on the ready at all times, lest you be lured back into the ways of suspicion, division and retaliation. Hold on tight to the hope that you've put your hands up to. None of this on-again off-again stuff!

Think about how to stir one another up to greater and greater love and more and more ways to put it into action. Some people will quit gathering together as a congregation altogether. It's understandable when the Church has failed so spectacularly, but don't go down that path. Gather often, support and encourage one another. The closer we get to that final day the more you'll need one another. The Church is coming crashing down, and the earth is being shaken to its foundations, and everything by which the powers-that-be maintained their delusions of peace is crumbling to dust in their deceitful grasping fingers. Stand up and

rejoice, for when all the crap has fallen away, just one thing will remain, love in all its glory, for God is love.”

And with that, Jesus tossed back the last of his wine, pushed back his chair, and said, “If we don’t get back to our backpacker’s soon, we’ll be locked out.”