

# When You Hear of Wars

*A sermon on Luke 21: 5-19 & Isaiah 65: 17-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 17 November 2019*

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## Message

Global chaos marked by war, terror and injustice is growing inevitably, and as followers of Jesus we stand in witness against it, knowing that God is with us to the end.

## Sermon

Jesus said, “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.”

These words have quite a different tone and flavour to most of the things Jesus is recorded as saying, but there are examples like this in each of the gospels. Jesus speaks of dark and foreboding visions of chaos and destruction. If you were living anywhere near the New South Wales bushfires this week, it would probably feel like a news report. The temple will be torn down. Society will descend into violence and terror. People of good faith will be hated and persecuted. The earth and the skies themselves will be shaken to their foundations. And everywhere war and the rumour of war.

We tend to feel rather uncomfortable when we hear this apocalyptic language on the lips of Jesus. In both Jesus’ day and ours, apocalyptic visions tend to be a somewhat marginal art form. We associate them with either escapist fantasies or religious extremism. In Jesus’ day apocalyptic visions were usually passed on in written literature or spoken story-telling. In our day they appear more often in the form of movies. In both days they also appear in preaching.

Apocalyptic visions take the sufferings and fears of the present and project them onto a larger screen, situating them in a giant depiction of a cosmic struggle between the powers of good and the forces of evil. In so doing, it can assure people that their present sufferings are not meaningless, but are an important part of something bigger and of ultimate importance.

But we are often very uncomfortable with apocalyptic visions unless they are confined to fantasy movies. As soon as they begin to be taken seriously in a religious context, we squirm. We squirm because of the way we have seen them used and abused.

On the one hand, some people use them to start trying to code-crack the biblical prophecies and predict the exact date of the end of the world, with every new geo-political event providing alleged clues to the unfolding sequence. On the other hand there are those who use the apocalyptic visions to ignite their own apocalyptic agendas, fermenting hatred and religiously sanctioned campaigns of violence and terror. And with not much else by way of example, we don’t want to start associating Jesus with either of those patterns.

But is our discomfort perhaps just a sign that we have domesticated Jesus, or is there more to it than that? Have we watered down Jesus, and made him all tame and inoffensive? Is there a more muscular warrior type Jesus who we are trying to avoid? Certainly much of the history of depictions of Jesus would suggest that there is. Jesus has often been portrayed as the

apocalyptic warrior prince who leads the armies of righteousness into battle against the hordes of evil. And generation after generation of soldiers have been fed on that image as they have been prepared for war, so that they can see themselves as following Jesus as they take to the battlefield to face the enemy. Apocalyptic computer games are now an important part of the recruiting and training strategy of many of the world's major military forces.

The apocalyptic passages from the gospels, the prophets and the book of Revelation, at least at first glance, lend themselves readily to this agenda. But is that what Jesus was seeking to set in motion? Is that what Jesus had in mind when he spoke in the language of apocalypse?

When we begin to look a bit closer, it appears that the answer has to be an emphatic no. Jesus draws on the kind of apocalyptic preaching that was known in his day, but he doesn't just reproduce it intact. He tweaks it in crucial ways. He subverts it from within, if you like. And the change is fundamental.

In its usual form, the apocalyptic vision did blow up the picture of whatever was going on to a scale where God was seen leading the battle, wreaking terrible judgement and punishment on all who had taken sides with evil. And so we ended up with an image of God as being an active perpetrator of sacred violence and vengeance.

And that vision, of course, fuelled the war machines on earth. We could march into bloody battle confident that we were the chosen instruments of divine retribution, purging the earth of evil and paving the way for the victorious kingdom of God. And frequently we have had two sides marching against each other, both equally confident that they were the instruments of God and that the other was the demonic power of darkness.

But Jesus subverts that. Jesus tells us that we will hear of wars and insurrections, and these things will certainly come. He speaks of violence and terror and bloodshed, and he is bleakly realistic about their inevitability. But he pointedly does not attribute them to God. He does not describe God as orchestrating war or taking sides in war or calling for anyone to fight for him in war.

Instead, Jesus begins to depict God as the crucified one, as the cosmic victim of all our hatred and violence and war. Yes, he speaks of a glorious and triumphant coming of the divine Son of Man who will overcome evil and establish that day of peace that we heard so enticingly promised in the reading we heard from Isaiah tonight, but that overcoming and triumph are not brought about with a blood-stained sword, but by surrendering himself to the cruel violence of the cross.

By stepping into the path of the onrush of the world's hostility and violence, and taking its full force in his own body, Jesus unmaskes the self-delusions of every system that imagines its violence as being sanctioned by God. By taking it in his own body, he reveals it for what it is: naked violence, spiralling out of control, and always deceitfully trying to legitimise itself by invoking the name of God. And there stands Jesus, unarmed and open-armed before it, embodying God's solidarity with the victims, with the wounded, the killed and the terrified.

If you listened to the official rhetoric of Remembrance Day last Monday, you would have heard plenty of images of the noble soldier risking his life in the cause of God and country. And I don't want to minimise or denigrate the many acts of heroism of many of those who

were lost in wars. Our nation and almost every nation has repeatedly asked such sacrifices from its soldiers, and those soldiers, believing in the rightness of their country, have been sacrificed upon the altars of patriotism and national interest.

But Jesus reveals to us a God who is not asking for such sacrifices or endorsing those claims by the nations. Jesus reveals to us a God who stands always with the victims, whether they be soldiers or civilians. God stands alongside them, as yet another innocent victim, sacrificed to the apocalyptic violence of the world and its nations.

The obscenity of much of what our country has been involved in in Afghanistan for nearly two decades cannot legitimately claim any divine sanction. Yes, there is evil and oppression in Afghanistan which we must work to end, but years of war are only entrenching it more deeply than ever.

If the money that has been spent on the war there had been spent making it profitable for the Afghani farmers to switch from growing opium to growing food crops, there is every likelihood we could have stabilised the economy, stopped the drug trade, cut off the drug-sourced funding of the Taliban, and saved tens of thousands of lives. But, of course, that kind of approach doesn't appeal to the perverted apocalyptic imagination that dreams only of emerging triumphant from a bloodbath.

Jesus said, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." These things are inevitable, Jesus says.

In part, they are inevitable because of what he has done. When he stripped them of their divine legitimations, one of the unfortunate side-effects is that they are also stripped of some of their checks and balances, and so they tend to spiral even more out of control. When you hear people who identify themselves as the Christian leaders of Christian nations defending torture as necessary means in a war against evil, then you know things are plunging out of control into the abyss.

"But do not be terrified," says Jesus. Easier said than done! "Do not be terrified. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. And by your endurance you will gain your souls."

Jesus is not minimising the reasons we might be afraid. He is bleakly realistic about them. But he is giving us a task and a promise. We are called to bear witness to the truth, to the identity of the divine victim who continues to cast himself before our nails and swords and bullets and bombs. We are called to bear witness to his peace, his forgiveness, his justice that comes through mercy and not through righteous violence. We are called to bear witness to that, both in our words, and in our lived actions, through our non-conformity with the ways of war and our active involvement in hospitality and reconciliation.

And we are given a promise. Mostly the promise is that things will go badly, things will get worse and, as his followers, we will bear much of the brunt of it!

But also the promise is that "I will be with you." We are not alone. In life or death, Jesus will be with us, leading us safely through the apocalyptic terrors, without a hair of our heads

being harmed. He has been there before, and he will walk there again with us, leading us, and all the victims of the apocalypse, into the glorious freedom depicted by Isaiah, where no more shall the sound of weeping be heard, and people will live and eat in safety from the work of their own hands, and the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and no-one will hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. Hasten the day! Come, Lord Jesus, Come! And all the people said... Amen!