

LUKE 21:5-19
KEEP THE FAITH!

How do you eat a Jaffa cake? There is more than one way, I can assure you. You can take a bite out of it like a normal biscuit, and finish it in two or three bites depending on how much of a hurry you're in! Or you can stuff the whole thing into your mouth all at once: a few years ago during a Joint Valley Service Stephen Fischbacher did that and then couldn't speak for the next part of his talk because his mouth was full of Jaffa cake! There is a third way: to take it apart layer by layer: the Jaffa cake has three layers: the chocolate on top, the sponge cake on the bottom and in the middle, a layer of orange jelly. It is possible to eat a Jaffa cake by eating the chocolate from the top, then eating the sponge and leaving the orange in the middle till last and so make the most of the whole Jaffa cake experience. Try it sometime!

This may seem a strange and very convoluted introduction to this week's Bible passage from Luke chapter 21, but for a very simple reason: to understand these words of Jesus we need to see that there are layers of truth, layers of understanding here. In all that Jesus says, He is talking about more than one thing: the discussion began about the temple and its future and so the first layer is to do with the future of the temple and of Jerusalem and what will happen to these great buildings that the disciples admire. As if to move seamlessly, Jesus then talks about 'the end of the age' and so there is a second layer of understanding that is all about His coming again to the world and what will happen at the end of the age when Jesus returns. In between these two layers there is a third layer which is about more than Jerusalem, but is not yet about the end and this is what might call 'signs of the age itself', i.e. what life will be like for us before Jesus comes again, what the world will be like and how do we cope with it? The difficulty sometimes is that we confuse these layers and granted, it is not always clear, but we will try to unpick something of these layers today.

It all began when Jesus and His disciples were walking through the city. The disciples were admiring the temple buildings; how beautiful these buildings were. They remarked about the beauty and the glory of temple, its beautiful stones, the gifts that adorned it for worship. It does not take much to imagine this little group, visiting the big city from Galilee, overwhelmed by the grandeur of these national buildings and by their splendour. Jesus said: "*As for...*" (v6) So the temple will be destroyed; there is a time coming when this glorious, splendid building will be destroyed and the stones thrown down and of course, the natural next question – when? "*When will ...*" (v7) I'm not sure that Jesus' next words are the answer to that question, but later in verse 20 He paints a picture of the city being surrounded by armies and when that happens then the city and the temple will be destroyed. Historians tell us that in AD70, the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem and destroyed it and the temple and so these words of Jesus came true. This is the first layer: Jesus predicts the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple and it was complete in AD 70.

Then there is the second layer; it comes later: Jesus paints a picture of Himself in a way that three of His disciples had already caught just a glimpse, but for the others this was new. Yet for anyone who knew his bible this was an old picture Jesus was completing: "*At that...*" (v.27) Here we move into 'the end of the age' territory; when this happens, the world as we know it will come to an end; everything will be changed when Jesus comes in glory like this. Jesus has promised that He will do this; some thought He was going to come within a generation of His leaving and when that didn't happen they began to think that the whole thing had been a mistake. But Jesus has not said when he will come, only that He will come and will create a new world, a new

heaven and a new earth and everything will be made new; there will be no more suffering, no more death, no more tears and we will live in perfect peace. Again, the question we want to ask is 'when?' and there has been all kinds of speculation – “the end of the world is nigh” say the placards; others have predicted that it will happen on such and such a day, but these 'prophecies' have not come true. Jesus will come again; He has promised; keep that hope in our hearts; the second layer of promise is in these words.

The third layer: what will life be like till then? What will the world be like till then? Sometimes we get confused or others confuse us. We mistake the signs of the age for signs of the end of the age. Let me explain. This third layer of understanding in this passage is about Jesus explaining to His disciples what the world will be like. “This is the kind of world in which you will have to be my disciples and my witnesses” and then paints a picture of that world and we'll look at it in a moment. But some have confused this by saying that Jesus is giving us signs of the *end* of the age: in other words, when we see these things happening, we can be sure that the end is coming; wars, earthquakes, persecution have been seen as indications that the end of the age is near and signs that Jesus is about to come back. But that is not what Jesus is saying here; He is simply describing life in the world in our age. This is the third layer.

So what will world be like according to Jesus? There are three things:

1) “I am the Messiah” how many people, in the last 2000 years have styled themselves as the Messiah? There are some that we might know and there are others of whom very few of us might have ever heard. Hundreds? Probably! People who have claimed that God has sent them to save world; people who have claimed to be given some direct revelation from God that will complete the work that Jesus did. Let me give you just one example: Sun Myung Moon: when he first came to prominence in the late 70's and began to spread his teaching beyond Korea and the US, he told the world that his new divine principle would heal the world; he is famous for conducting mass weddings in which hundreds of men and women are married never having met each other before. He also made the claim that Jesus' original mission had failed because He died without ever being married and that His death was a failure so that God had somehow to rescue Him by the resurrection and that Moon was sent to complete the work Jesus failed to do! He is not the only one who has come making such claims. “*watch...*” (v8)

2) “Wars and revolutions” What are your hopes for the world? Today we pray for peace and reconciliation amongst the nations, at a time when we also remember the horrors of war and the price that people pay for our peace and freedom. We hope and pray for peace, but we know that the reality of the world can be very different. Conflict is so often at the heart of our dealings with other people, at every level, from individuals all the way up to the nations! That is how it will be! We pray for a world in which people will have enough to eat and there is probably plenty of food to go around, but we also know that crops fail because of drought or crops are flooded and destroyed and people go hungry. Anyone who has any understanding of the way in which the earth works, has to know that earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, etc are all part and parcel of the planet on which we live. This is what life is like. There are other parts to life, so many good things for us to enjoy in world, but we must be realistic; bad things happen; life will always be like that! “*When you...*” (v9)

3) persecution – there are 2 stories in the papers in last two weeks: the first from Baghdad, the story of a group of Christians being attacked in their church as they worshipped, being taken hostage and at least 52 Christians being killed. Last week, there was a story of Christians in Pakistan being persecuted for their faith and being

forced to meet in secret for fear. Jesus says even our friends and family will turn against us and some will be put to death for the faith. Christians are losing their jobs because of their faith; others are being discriminated against because of Christian principles – this is the world in which we live. The disciples might have expected that because they were preaching good news and bringing blessing to the world that the world would greet them with open arms and at times it does; but there are also times when the disciples of Jesus are treated very differently in our world; it has been like that for 2000 years and is no different today.

So, what are we to do? There are all kinds of possible reactions to world of false messiahs, wars and revolutions, and persecution; and at times Christians have done these and others:

- you could become a hermit, go and live in seclusion somewhere, on your own, cut off from the world and its bad things and try to pretend that the world out there doesn't exist; that might seem attractive, but it can be seen as simply abrogating any responsibility for the world of which we are a part.
- you can be frightened by the world; you can become worried and anxious about the world and give up any faith – there is so much evil in the world, or persecution for our faith is so violent, that we give up the faith and you would hardly blame the Christians in Iraq for giving up their faith or for leaving the country in the aftermath of their experience.

Jesus says: *“By standing firm...” (v19)* In a world where there are false messiahs, in a world where there are wars, earthquakes and famines, in a world where Christians are persecuted for their faith – stand firm! Perseverance is the key. When everything around us seems to challenge and undermine faith, persevere in faith; when we're tired out by the pressures of life and the world, persevere in faith; when people laugh at us for our faith or ask us questions we can't answer because they want to put us on the spot and embarrass us, persevere in faith. It would be easy to cave in under pressure; it would be easy to simply turn our backs on the whole thing because it is too much hassle, and too hard; it would be easy to be frightened and anxious by the world and make that the reason for giving up faith – we might say “God has gone away”.

God has not gone away; God is with us always and everywhere. In this world, where people falsely claim to be the messiah, in this world where people hate each other enough to go to war, in this world where people are hungry because crops have failed, in this world where people suffer because of earthquakes, in this world where good people, people of faith, people who simply want to bless others, are persecuted for their faith – in this world, God is with us; God has not left us, we are not abandoned; Jesus will come again. So stand firm! Persevere in faith; keep believing in the God who loves us; keep sharing His love, keep serving others as Jesus did; keep being the kind of people that Jesus wants us to be. *“By standing...”*