

MARK 13

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

The object of this chapter is to display Jesus' ability to predict the fates of the Temple, of the World, and of the elect, and his coming as the Son of Man. The reason why this is important, especially at this stage of the Gospel, is connected with the Passion Account itself, which begins in the next chapter. It is vital to see that Jesus can foresee, and to that extent to will, the Passion.

The image of Jesus as an accurate predictor of the future has been built up steadily as part of the Gospel's unfolding. He predicts that the fishermen will catch people in ch. 1, and they do in ch. 6; in ch. 9 he predicts that they would not taste death before seeing the rule of God come in power, and in the same chapter they see Jesus transfigured. The prediction about the colt is fulfilled on Palm Sunday, and three times Jesus predicts his own Passion, and it will come to pass. In the remainder of the text, predictions and their fulfilments will crowd in: a man carrying a pitcher of water and an upper room: betrayal by one of the Twelve: desertion by all the disciples, and denials by Peter. If we take these together with the healings, exorcisms, and authoritative teaching, we will have built up a picture of a very reliable character indeed. But now, in chapter 13, he predicts that they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and great glory. This will be fulfilled only beyond the oncoming Passion, and indeed after the writing of this Gospel, and after the reading of it. But this insulates the Passion Account from the drawing of conclusions damaging to Jesus. We are being told that Jesus made this prediction before his death; it is not a sticking-plaster put over a scandalous and disastrous end to his movement, it is a mapping-out in advance of what is yet to be. His knowledge of it in advance means that it is in no sense an accident.

The monologue which makes up most of this chapter is very much the longest in the Gospel which, as we have already remarked, is very low on doctrinal discourses. In its uninterruptedness it is unique in Mark.

The tearing down of the great structures of the Herodian Temple is the first prediction. Jesus starts with the word "See": *You see these great buildings? Not a stone will be left on a stone, they will all be overthrown.* The four named disciples are suitably astounded, and ask for more information about when these things will take place, and whether they will be warned by any sign. Jesus begins with an injunction to be watchful: "See that no-one leads you astray." - once again, the injunction to see. The same verb will occur three more times in the passage we are reading today: in v. 9, *See to yourselves* and again in v.23 *See yourselves*, and in v.33 *See, be wakeful* (JB translates: *Be on your guard*). The danger of deception is extreme. Jesus predicts that the charlatans will be so clever that, the more of them come, the more people will be deceived.

We should notice that Jesus is not really answering the question posed by the disciples, but going on to speak about details of other events. The false christs will arise and deceive, there will be wars and rumours of wars; but these do not constitute, or even herald, the end. The statement that "these things must happen" implies that they are already catered for in the plan of God. Mark is interested in the detailed knowledge of

future history that he attributes to Jesus.

What does the “watch yourself” of v.9 warn against? Not the handings-over to persecution themselves: the context leaves no doubt that these are going to happen. Rather, he tells them to prepare, so that *when* the times predicted arrive, the disciples will have the strength and determination to hold fast to the faith. They will hand you over to sanhedrins and synagogues, and the unlikely prediction is made that the humble fishermen addressed will be called to bear witness before crowned heads. Even more extraordinary, the Gospel will be proclaimed before all the nations. We know from Paul and Acts that, by the time the Gospel is written, the disciples of Jesus will have undergone all these experiences. These fulfilments, all the more impressive because of their unlikelihood, contribute to Mark’s emphasis on Jesus’ power to predict. So the “beginning of the birthpangs” is not a short period; the whole world is to be covered by it. All this time the disciples will be witnessing, suffering persecution, and risking the danger of deception; and however long it may last, it will remain “only the beginning”.

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptise his disciples with the Holy Spirit (1:8) and now Jesus promises that under persecution the Spirit will be speaking in them. “Whatever is given you, speak it” contains a divine passive (*whatever God gives you*).

You will be handed over is a favourite phrase for martyrdom; but it also carries the sense of confiding: Jesus is *handed over* to Pilate (15:1) by the Sanhedrin, and Pilate *hands him over* (15:15) to be crucified; but Jesus *hands over* his Spirit in Jn 19:30, and Paul speaks of the brethren who are “given up to death” (2 Cor 4:11). In several places the NT says that all things have been handed over to the Son by the Father. The way in which family life is destabilized shows the extreme virulence of the time of persecution Jesus is predicting; In Mic 7:6 a general breakdown in society becomes specific in family betrayal; here it is the presence of faith in Jesus that precipitates this particular desecration. Endurance *to the end* will be required - there is something terminal about this time of disaster, and the end in question is personal, only to be requited by God’s gift of eternal life.

The Abomination of Desolation 14-20

refers to a sacrilege which makes people desert the Temple.