

3 December 2023

Isaiah 64:1-9  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:24-37

In September last year Christopher Luxon spoke to the press as he stood on the tiled floor outside Parliament's debating chamber. There he said something that at the time seemed astonishing and also a bit confusing, but now makes perfect sense. "Do you see this great building?" he said, gesturing towards the Beehive. "It is going to be rattled to its foundations. At that time colleague will betray colleague; members will be found wanting and some will even find themselves before the courts. There will be a great red blood-letting in the polls: these are just the beginning of birth pangs. But in those days, following that distress, the people will speak and their voices will at last be heard. A great tsunami of change will come upon the nation and all that is red and green will become blue. Yours Truly will be elected Prime Minister. There will be a sea-change of personnel in the Beehive, there will be a shredding of the policies of the left, and the country will be set back on track. At that time you will see Yours Truly sworn in before the Governor General and issued with the PM's warrant. So I say to the present inhabitants of the Beehive: be on guard, be alert, have your boxes packed for the move. Watch out!"

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Now, before I carry on, I need to make two things very clear. First, the scene I have just recounted is entirely fictional. Second, it is not my intention in this fiction to imply that Christopher Luxon is any "messiah figure", the saviour of our nation.

The reason I have invented this little fiction is to highlight several key things about our Gospel passage today.

In my story I have depicted Luxon using picture language, idiom, and metaphor – phrases like "blood-letting", "tsunami of change", "shredding of policies" – which are not to be taken literally.

The same is true in Jesus' words in Mark 13: throughout he is using figurative language to convey massive and significant events of change.

In the speech I have given Luxon one could easily think that he foresees all the events happening at the same time. It sounds as if he thinks he will become PM when the election takes place. But then perhaps only when the final count is confirmed? Or is it only when he is finally sworn in? The three events – and everything else resulting from them – seem conflated. But in a real sense such conflation is natural: on election night in October we knew who had become PM; last week that was formalised as Luxon was sworn in. And we know that as a result of this new government many things have changed. The various things are separated in time: but they are directly linked with near certainty.

I use this to illustrate and explain one of the challenges with Mark 13. There is massive debate about what events and times Jesus is describing at exactly which point in his talk to the disciples. Regardless of the various nuances within that debate, there is broad consensus that two or three key events are in view. One is the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Another is the destruction of Jerusalem, which eventually took place some 40 years after Jesus' death. The last is the return of Christ at the end of the age to rule the whole world.<sup>1</sup> And the point, regardless of uncertainties about the detail, is that these events are all intrinsically linked as part of God's plan through Christ to bring about the fullness of his kingly reign. As it happens we are now living *between* these key events – and it is in part this fact that makes us uncertain about how to regard the details of Jesus' description.

And that leads into the next point. I deliberately chose a political story, not just for its currency, but for the fact that it is about *a change in government*.

Change of government is exactly what Jesus is talking about. He is talking about the radical change of government<sup>2</sup> that is the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Our recent national election could be taken as a devastating judgement on the Labour government and vindication for Christopher Luxon and his policy positions. In the same way, the events that Jesus foretells are, in the near term, judgement of the present leadership of the nation, and vindication of Jesus, his message, and his kingship. In the long term, Jesus is looking towards

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<sup>1</sup> See Strauss, *Mark*, pp.562-599, especially pp.564-566, 589-591; see also Wright, *Mark*, 183-184.

<sup>2</sup> See France, cited in Strauss, *Mark*, p.591

the extension of all this to all the nations, to all of creation: final judgement on the forces of evil, and victory for Jesus as King of Kings.

Why such a change of government might be needed is foreshadowed in Isaiah. Isaiah 64 is a heart-felt passage, begging God for rescue from their present state. The nation that had enjoyed a largely settled time under King David, the shepherd king, became fractured in two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Severely weakened – in every way, including spiritually – and being mere minnows in the geopolitics of the region, both kingdoms are eventually overthrown, occupied, and their leading citizens exiled. By time addressed in the final chapters of Isaiah, the first exiles have returned from Babylon. “It was a time of high expectations and immense difficulties. There was tension between the returnees and those, including foreigners, who had been living in the area during their absence. There were the frustrations inevitably associated with limited self-rule. The Judea to which they returned had been incorporated into the Persian empire, so they were home but still not their own masters. Their numbers and resources were limited, and neighbouring groups viewed them with suspicion or outright hostility.”<sup>3</sup>

This is the context for the amazing prayer expressed in chapters 63 and 64 of Isaiah. Isaiah recalls the goodness and grace of God experienced by the nation of old, and the sense of assurance of God’s power and faithfulness that those experiences gave. But there is also recognition of their failings, their rebellion and sinfulness. Their own sinfulness, and the devastating experience of having lost their land, their nationhood, their autonomy as a people under God, and their temple, together now create uncertainty in the relationship. Where is God now? Has his patience at long last been exhausted?<sup>4</sup>

As the people lament and shake their fists at their apparently absent, uncaring God, they suddenly see themselves as if a mirror has been held up to their behaviour. “They remember, suddenly who this God is, their maker and their father. God has

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<sup>3</sup> Webb, *Isaiah*, p.219

<sup>4</sup> Webb, *Isaiah*, pp.241-242

not been hidden from them, but they have been too busy, being somewhere else, looking at everything but God.”<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of this then comes a profound plea: “O that you would rend the heavens and come down.”

The Hebrew word translated “rend” or “tear open” is “a form of a verb almost always used for rending a garment. In the cultural world of the Hebrew Bible [Old Testament], rending a garment is a socially meaningful action. It is not an act of frustration or anger. It is rather a visible, bodily expression of grief, lament, or remorse. The prophet voices the people’s lament, but also dares to invite God to do the same. To rend God’s own garment. To cross the space between heaven and earth, yes. To rip open the cosmic barrier between realms and descend to be with the people on earth. But also to bridge the chasm of hurt and silence. To voice God’s complaint, God’s sorrow. Perhaps even God’s remorse.”<sup>6</sup>

And it is here that we are carried right back to Jesus. For the way in which God entered human affairs, the way in which God bridged the gap was in sending his Son, Jesus the perfect human; the way in which God exhibited sorrow was in the birth, ministry, suffering and death of Jesus. And it is in his dying, rising again, and ascension that we discover that he is also the King: the change of government Isaiah and his contemporaries long for ultimately comes in the person of Jesus.

In my story I talked of the inhabitants of Beehive offices – staffers and politicians alike – having to pack their boxes in readiness for the change of government. In the same way Jesus is using figures of speech to highlight the need for constant readiness – the fig tree coming into leaf, the doorkeeper awaiting his master’s return.

But what kind of readiness, watchfulness, vigilance is needed?

Do we have to be in a state of constant alert? “It can’t be good to remain in a constant state of tension. Our fight-or-flight reflex is intended to be utilised in limited situations. Our bodies and minds aren’t intended to remain in that kind of intense

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Reflections*, p.3

<sup>6</sup> Portier-Young, “Commentary”

readiness all the time. Yet here in the text we are instructed to stay awake, to stay alert. We don't, as the passage suggests, want to be caught sleeping when he returns. But how can we stay up all of the time?"<sup>7</sup>

I'm not sure that Jesus' words and illustrations need to be pressed that far. In my Luxon story if he did say all this in September last year, he would not have been talking about the need to literally pack boxes then. What he would have been giving is due warning: this *is* how it is going to be, so prepare yourself mentally; don't keep accumulating more stuff; don't make long term plans for your work there.

In the same way I believe we need to keep a clarity of focus on the present in the light of God's future. This will in part mean attending to what it is in this life that prepares us for the life of the age to come: ways in which we train ourselves in kingdom ways and kingdom values; a lifestyle of constant discipleship.

It will also mean in part holding lightly to the things and actions that, while of importance to this life, will be of no importance in the age to come. For example, many possessions have their function in life now; they have no place in the age to come. So we hold a light attitude towards them and their accumulation. Every day life requires certain tasks be performed – having a job that provides income enough that we can buy what we need to live on and sustain those we care for, for example – but we keep those tasks in proper perspective and balance, we go about them in a way that is true to the way of Christ, we don't let them distract us from noticing what God is doing in the world, and we seek to follow God's will in what we choose to do or not do.

The story is told of an eclipse seen in New England in the 1700s during which state legislators panicked and several moved to adjourn the assembly. But one of them said, "Mr Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought."<sup>8</sup> To be "found doing our duty" is a stance not just for legislators but for every follower of Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Adkins-Jones, "Commentary"

<sup>8</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jun. *Mark: Interpretation Bible Commentary*, quoted in Dale, *Windows*, p.11

There are various sets of Advent themes that could be chosen for the four Sundays of this season. In the set that I have chosen the First Sunday in Advent has the theme of Hope. And ultimately we have real hope because in this season we are “not merely planning for a cute little baby to be born in a manger, but also for the recreation of this world when that baby returns full-grown”<sup>9</sup> with full power and all authority.

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<sup>9</sup> Adkins-Jones, “Commentary”