

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

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Scripture: Mt. 24:32-34

*"Learn the Parable of the Fig Tree"*

**THE YEAR 2012: END OF THE WORLD OR BEGINNING OF A NEW AGE?**

If you have watched any TV or read any magazine or newspaper in the last year you probably have come across some discussion concerning the significance of the year 2012. Now if you don't know what I am talking about, let me explain. Supposedly, the Mayan Calendar ends on our December 21 or December 23, 2012 depending on who you ask. The Mayans, like other ancient peoples, studied the stars and sky and based their calendar on the various astronomical alignments they could observe from earth. The end of their calendar meant the end of the present age and the beginning of a new one. And like a typical ancient culture they believed that the astronomical alignments had spiritual significance.

As a result, there are many people who think the world may end or something of cataclysmic will happen on that date. Some New Agers even believe something positive will happen. They believe that the spiritual consciousness of the world will change in 2012. Some contend that there instead will be a physical change to our earth; a geomagnetic shift due to a solar maximum even though scientists will tell you that such shifts take thousands of years to complete. And then there are even some Christians who believe this may mark the start of the Tribulation period or the rise of the Antichrist. And so the speculation, the theories and book selling goes on and on and on. And will continue to do so up until December 21, 2012.

So what are we to think? First, anytime anyone starts assigning dates ahead a time concerning the fate of the world – especially the end of the world, or concerning matters that contradict God's Word they should be suspect. No one knows the future except for the Lord God. Jesus said in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospel that ***"No one knows the day or the hour of the Son's Return, not the angels nor the Son, but the Father alone."*** Second, the Bible is clear the present age will not end until Christ returns. And it won't be the pagans foretelling the time of Christ's return.

Jesus did say however, that there would be signs preceding His return and that we should pay special attention to those signs. In fact, though we may not know the day or the hour, we would be able to know the season or the period of His return.

**KNOW THE SIGNS**

Please turn with me to **Matthew 24:32-34**: ***"Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."***

Some believe the fig tree here represents Israel and so when Israel becomes a nation again then within that generation Christ will return. Others contend that the fig tree doesn't represent Israel but rather Christ is using the example of the fig tree to represent the signs of His return in general. In other words, just as you know that summer is near when the leaves come on the tree in the springtime, so too will you know that Christ's return is near when you see the signs foretold by Jesus coming to pass. So rather than

one sign being the indicator, it is when a series of certain signs come to pass that will set the stage for Christ's Return. Either way, we need to know and be ready to understand the signs of Christ's Return.

Now look back at the beginning of **Matthew 24:3**: And as he was sitting on the mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "***Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?***"

Two things we learn from this question and Jesus' subsequent answer. First, there will be signs, and second, Christ's coming will coincide with the end of the present age of human history.

Now there are some in the church who like to ignore this part of God's Word. I remember back in 1997, when I went to my old alma mater, Virginia Seminary, for a week of continuing education that I met a priest who used to serve in the Diocese of WNY. I mentioned that I was at St. Bart's with Fr. Amend. And he said, "Oh yes I remember Russell, does he still preach about Revelation and Christ's Return?" I said, "Yes." And then he replied, "Well I don't believe in all that stuff."

Shouldn't surprise us should it? Since many Episcopal priests don't believe in much of the stuff in God's Word!

### **THE SECOND COMING IS AT THE HEART OF BIBLE PROPHECY**

The truth is Jesus spent time with His disciples telling them of the signs. And such words are found not just in one Gospel but in three: **Matthew, Mark and Luke**. And then Jesus personally revealed in more detail the specifics of these signs and events in **the Book of Revelation**. And the Apostle Paul spoke of them in **1 and 2 Thessalonians**, and so did the Apostle Peter in his second letter (**2 Peter 3**) and the Apostle John spoke of the Antichrist and the spirit of the Antichrist in his first epistle (**1 John 2 & 4**). And who can forget the Old Testament? The disciples were familiar with the Old Testament prophecies as well; prophecies found in the books of **Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Jeremiah**.

So when it comes to the end of the age, don't bother listening to the static out in the world, we need to go right to the Word of God. In fact, as I mentioned during the Christmas Eve Sermon, Christ's return is mentioned more than any other event in the Bible – over 300 times. Why is it so important? It completes God's plan of salvation for mankind. It finishes the work God began in the Garden of Eden. And it should be something we all long for, look for, prepare for, and pray for.

The Psalms call on us to "***pray for the peace of Jerusalem.***" (**Ps. 122:6**). Why? Jerusalem has been anything but a city of peace. Today it is at the heart of the conflict between Jews and Moslems. The truth is there will be no lasting peace until Christ returns. So when we pray for the peace of Jerusalem we are really praying for Christ's Return! What does the Apostle John say in the last chapter of Revelation? He prays, "***Come, Lord Jesus.***" And that's why the Lord said in **Lk. 21:28**, "***But when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.***"

The Second Coming is called *the Blessed Hope* for a reason. It will be the time when the curse of sin and death is removed and that we will be fully redeemed – body, soul and spirit.

## **ARE WE IN THE LAST DAYS?**

So are we in the last days? The Bible says in **Hebrews 1:1-2**: *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."*

God's Word is clear - we are in the last days - the final age of human history. The question, however, is "Are we in the final chapter of this age or in the second to last final chapter?" I personally believe that we are in, if not the last, the second to last chapter. The stage is being set. All the pieces of the puzzle are being put together for the Return of our Lord. Why do I believe this? Let me give you some reasons - some signs if you will:

1) **Rebirth of the Nation of Israel** – Many Bible prophecies declare that Israel will be restored and be in existence at the time of the Lord's Return. In 1948, after 2600 years the Jews have a homeland under their control - the same land God gave to Abraham 4000 years ago. In 1967, East Jerusalem is retaken by the Israel's and comes under Jewish control. A reunified Jerusalem becomes the official capital of Israel again for the first time in over 2600 years. But even more important, the Israelis retake the Temple Mount which was in East Jerusalem, the most sacred spot in the world for Jewish believers.

Just a couple weeks ago at the Holocaust Remembrance Ceremonies, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that he believed the rebirth of the nation of Israel out of the ashes of the Holocaust was the fulfillment of **Ezekiel 37**. Recall that this is the chapter in which Ezekiel sees a vision of dry bones and then God says to prophesy to the bones and then Ezekiel hears a rattling and the bones begin to come together and tendons and flesh appeared on them and then skin covered them and then the breath of God breathed into them and they came to life! But now notice what the Lord God declares in **Ez. 37:12-14**: *"Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'*

With this rebirth has come the restoration of the ancient language of Hebrew, and the restoration of the land as an agricultural breadbasket, another fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

The Bible also speaks of Israel being surrounded by enemies before Christ returns (**cf. Ez. 38; Zech. 12-14**). Today Israel is surrounded by hostile nations who are united in their disdain for Israel because of their Islamic beliefs. Chief among these nations is Iran who according to Israeli intelligence should have a nuclear bomb by this year. And whose leader has not only denied the holocaust, but believes that Israel should be wiped off the map. And the truth is that Anti-Semitism is still rampant throughout the world and the United Nations has consistently sided with the Arabs when it comes to the Palestinian problem.

2) **The Revival of the Roman Empire** – The Bible teaches that there will be a revived world empire that would rule before Christ returns (**cf. Daniel 2, 7, Rev. 13**). Most prophecy scholars believe this to be a revived Roman Empire. What is fascinating is that for the first time since the first century, Europe is united in peace. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome was established bringing together the six Western European nations - Belgium, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Italy, West Germany and France. That group originally known as the EEC (European Economic Community) has since grown to 27 nations and is now

known as the European Union. As of December 1, 2009, after nearly a decade of work and wrangling between member states, a new European Constitution took effect after being ratified by all 27 nations in what is known as the Treaty of Lisbon. It strengthens the European Parliament giving it new lawmaking powers in conjunction with the European Council. It also created a permanent President of the European Council. If 1999 gave Europe the Euro – a common currency for all member states, then 2009 has given Europe a New Constitution increasing the political power of the European Union.

3) **The Growth of the Church and false religions** – Jesus said the gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth before He returns (Mt. 24:14). We are seeing that sign come to pass. The Church of Jesus Christ, which began with twelve apostles and a few hundred disciples, has grown to over 2 Billion Adherents in every corner of the globe. While there are still different ethnic groups to be reached, more and more people are hearing the Gospel and coming to Christ like never before. At the same time, there has been an explosion of false cults and religions. Jesus said it would be so - many false prophets and christs will come and deceive many (Mt. 24:24).

4) **The Advent of the Computer, Mass Communication, and Travel** - for the first time in human history, huge amounts of information can be stored, processed and disseminated. We can travel the globe in a matter of hours. Cameras on earth and on satellites can watch our every move. We now have the technology to track every person, to have a database on every human being and the technology to personally identify individuals through computer chips and/or numbers. Our social security numbers are a forerunner to future means of control and identification. The Bible teaches that in the last days no one will be able to buy or sell without *the mark of the beast* and that the government of the Antichrist will have total control over most of humanity.

5) **The Establishment of the United Nations** - for the first time in human history we have an organization that seeks to coordinate the efforts and interactions of all the nations of the world. Although it is often ineffective and irrelevant, it still sets the groundwork for a future world rule.

6) **Science Affirms that Natural Cataclysmic Disasters are not just possible but probable** – the natural disasters foretold in Bible prophecy include earthquakes, red tides, climate change, asteroids, plague, famine, all of which are scientific realities. In fact, scientists will tell you that such events are not a matter of if, but when.

These are but a few of the signs which I believe confirm that we are fast approaching the last chapter in human history. We will look at such signs in more detail as we study the Bible prophecies pertaining Christ's coming during Friday Night Bible Studies in Lent (Feb. 19 - March 26). Until then may we take to heart Jesus' words in **Lk. 21:34-36**: *"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."*