

Exegetical Brief: Matthew 10:23— Which Coming of the Son of Man?

By, Paul E. Zell

“Here I stand!” On Reformation Sunday the preacher could speak about Luther’s bold testimony at Worms. He may point to the courage of the apostles and the early church fathers, celebrating the gospel we currently enjoy because our ancestors took their stand on the Word of God. Yet the preacher first and foremost will preach his text. As the gospel lesson appointed for Reformation Sunday this year, Matthew 10:16-23 will not disappoint.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was sending the Twelve out “to the lost sheep of Israel,” calling them to work their way through towns and cities and preach the kingdom of heaven. He provided a job description characterized by fearsome forewarnings and pleasing promises. The Twelve would be “like sheep among wolves,” he announced, yet they would go out with authority because the Lord himself sent them. They would need to testify to mighty spiritual and civil authorities, he predicted, yet the Spirit of their Father would speak through them. All people, even family members, would turn against them. Still “he who stands firm to the end will be saved,” Jesus pledged. Upon this momentous promise the preacher urges his listeners to stand firm and testify about Jesus, confident that his promises remain true today.

But how is the preacher to explain the final promise of this text? According to Matthew 10:23b Jesus vowed, “I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (ἕως ἄν ἔλθῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου). To which of his comings is Jesus referring? Perhaps he is referring to his παρουσία: You won’t finish the task of preaching to Israel before I come in glory. Christ’s coming on the Last Day is certainly mentioned frequently enough in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Prior to that great day Jesus commissions his disciples to keep bringing the gospel to the Jews, never giving up. Under his blessing they will preach boldly until he returns to vindicate his witnesses, rescue those who have believed, and punish those who have persecuted them.

Some hear Jesus foretelling the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple: You won’t reach every Israelite community before I come down in judgment upon the very people who rejected me. The victory belonged to the Son of Man and his disciples, not to those who drove them from town to town. Their countrymen were courting disaster, in fact, since they failed to receive the Son of Man. So his disciples would warn them with urgency, knowing that their opportunities to evangelize the cities of Israel (and for those precious souls to repent) would soon be withdrawn.

Others take verse 23b as a combination of sorts: You won’t reach all of the Jews before I come with my wrath upon Jerusalem and, for that matter, upon the entire unbelieving world. The Lord’s judgment upon all who persecuted his holy church would be foreshadowed by the destruction of Jerusalem and then fulfilled completely at his second coming. With this one statement Jesus is speaking of two separate events, some say. This is the prophetic perspective he also displayed when instructing these apostles on Tuesday of Holy Week, merging several historically scattered events into one discourse (Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21). Again the point: No matter how intense the opposition, the Savior’s church will testify to the Jews until the Son of Man comes to judge his foes and take the faithful to their heavenly home.

None of these explanations contradicts the Word of God. Any of them is worthy of further consideration. Consider Jesus’ words once more, however. “I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Could the Lord Jesus not have been speaking of that “coming” toward which his entire earthly ministry was heading? You won’t finish bearing witness to the cities of Israel, he was announcing, till the Son of Man comes to lay down his life on the cross, rise from the grave, ascend into heaven, and pour out the Holy Spirit.

The apostles were instructed to preach, “The kingdom of heaven is near.” What was that except to proclaim that the long-awaited King’s passion, resurrection, and ascension was at hand? Anticipating this coming of the Messiah would calm their trembling knees as they traveled from one village in Israel to the next.

Nor would they be disappointed. On Easter Sunday the Son of Man came and spoke his word to his disciples, confirming that everything they had been told to say about him was true. Pentecost would embolden them even further. Afterwards they would be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem and in all Judea but in Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8). Indeed, the terminology Jesus used here was not an unusual way to foretell the great events that would take place at Jerusalem. “I will ask the Father,” he said, “and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. . . . You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you (Jo 14:16-18, NIV).

It appears unlikely in this context that Jesus was predicting the horrors that would take place when Roman legions surrounded Jerusalem 40 years later. Nor was he necessarily foretelling what is to take place when he comes on the clouds with power and great glory and all his angels with him. His sights were set on that which was just a few months hence. Shortly before his transfiguration he made a statement quite similar to this one. Matthew 16:28, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (ἕως ἄν ἴδθσιν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐρχομενον ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ) As it turned out, Judas may have been the only one who tasted death prior to the Lord’s coming in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The rest of the apostles were very much alive to see the mighty Son of Man establishing a mighty kingdom of grace.

“Here I stand!” Where did Luther’s boldness come from? Satan was experienced from thousands of years of attacks against God’s children. Devils filled all the world and threatened the Reformer’s life just as they had once threatened the Twelve. But Luther’s King had already come to Jerusalem to defeat the wicked ones by cross and resurrection and a generous outpouring of his Holy Spirit. “We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpower us.” From what source do you and I gather the same confidence? The old evil foe and his devilish allies still attack the church. But our King has come and established a kingdom against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. “Our victory is won; the kingdom’s ours forever.” So we preach the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike. Witnesses go with it boldly into cities and towns and villages. We urge all the saints to testify even when there is opposition. “Stand firm!” we tell them, so that others too may hear and rejoice that the King has come.

God bless your preaching this Reformation Sunday!