

Pastoral Letter

April 2011

Signs of the times

The world can be a dangerous and a puzzling place to live. It was a mark of the tribe of Issachar that they 'had understanding of the times' (1 Chronicles 12:32), and that is something which all Christians need to have. It is no indication of spiritual maturity if we have no idea what's going on, cannot make sense of what God is doing, or are unable to give a cogent answer to any who ask us 'what is the world coming to?'. There is a very great deal that we do not and cannot know, but we have no excuse for knowing nothing.

In his teaching recorded for us in Mark 13, the Lord Jesus Christ addresses this vital question of 'the times'. Central to this is what we often refer to as 'the signs of the times'. It is very gracious of the Lord that he tells us all of this, so that we are not left in ignorance.

There are troubles warned of here on every side. In *the religious sphere*, there will be false teachers seeking to lead us astray, people claiming to come in Christ's name when they are doing nothing of the sort, and much confusion resulting in both the church and the nations. In *the political sphere* there will be 'wars and rumours of wars', with nations and kingdoms rising up against one another. Christians will be falsely spoken of and persecuted in all sorts of ways. In *the natural sphere* we are told to expect earthquakes and famines. And in *the family sphere*, families themselves will fall apart and there will be attacks on the things of the family from outside.

Without any question *all of these things* are in evidence right now. Every news bulletin contains at least some of them. Yet even so, says Jesus, 'These are but the beginning of the birth pains'. So how are we to respond? Or, in the words of the psalmist, 'if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (Psalm 11:3).

Here are three brief counsels to keep us on the right lines:

- Whatever happens, and however grim or bleak things appear, do not be surprised. We have been warned in advance that these things will be so. The Lord reigns.
- Remember that Jesus makes clear not only the factors we have mentioned above, but certain encouragements as well – in particular that the gospel will be proclaimed to all nations, help will be given us from the Holy Spirit when we have to give account of ourselves before men, and 'the one who endures to the end will be saved'.
- While we are told not to attempt to 'date' the return of Christ at the end of the age, and that 'the last days' extend from his first coming until his second, yet clearly the longer time goes on the nearer the end must be. This should make us urgent in at least two areas: to make our own calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10), and to 'shine as lights in the world' (Philippians 2:15).