

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
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Matthew 28: 1-15**

By the time of Jesus, centuries of prophecy, writing and thinking had gone into what Jews expected to happen when the promised Messiah would come.

A literary genre, called apocalyptic writing, had sprung up in the centuries before Jesus was born, and was flourishing at the time he walked the earth. It was characterised by the use of certain language and imagery that those who were familiar with it would recognise immediately.

In these writings, earth tremors, blood red moons, falling stars, severe thunderstorms, lightning bolts, solar eclipses and the raising of the dead were all expected to accompany the arrival of the Messiah and herald the end of times.

What would happen next was under discussion. Most would have expected some kind of judgment where the righteous would be saved and glorified, and the unrighteous condemned. Some believed a change in the earthly spheres would bring the Messiah to the throne and topple every other worldly power, just like the arrival of a new and righteous king was pictured in some of the psalms. Others believed the world would be destroyed and the righteous taken up to another place where they would live in heavenly bliss forever. And then there were numerous variations, which combined these two views in one way or another.

Of course there were, as there are now, people who did not believe in an apocalyptic end time, with a last judgment, or the coming of a Messiah at all; nor in the bodily resurrection of the dead, or in an afterlife in any shape or form. It was, in fact, not so different from beliefs and ideas that are around now.

Especially when times are tough, and the present is not a good place to be, people will dream. And the more hopeless and desperate the present, the further into the future, and often out of the future into the spheres of heaven, people will start to project their dreams and hopes. Complete with Messianic figures with special powers who will be able to do what seems impossible and unattainable for mere mortals to bring about at the present time.

They often cloak those dreams and desires in bizarre imagery and language to protect themselves against oppressors who may see their dreaming and hopes as subversive, and might be tempted to clamp down on them.

It is not surprising that this genre – this dreaming and hoping and projecting beyond the here and now into a far-away future, complete with a Messianic figure with special powers to make it all happen – started to flourish amongst Jews in Palestine in 200-400 years before Jesus was born.

Continuously under threat, with several different super powers taking turns occupying their land, brutally oppressing their national identity, religion and culture, it is no wonder that their thoughts and hopes turned inwards. Unable to engage in rebellious actions, rendered completely helpless and hopeless with odds stacked overwhelmingly against them, writing and dreaming about a time when this would all be different became one of the ways to keep their identity and hopes alive against the despair of the present moment.

Oppressed by Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans for centuries, the only thing the Jews could do was tell each other that one day - one day - God would send someone to turn their fortunes around, to liberate them and restore them to the former glory of the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, of Moses, of David and Solomon. Days where they would be strong and free once again, God's

chosen people, protected and loved and different from all the world around them. Not just another insignificant little kingdom that was at the mercy of whichever super power controlled the region at the time, worshipping a God that nobody took very seriously as a power of any significance in the scheme of things.

It is against this background, and in that environment, that Jesus lives his life and dies on a cross. It is against this background, and in that environment, that his disciples start to see and hope that maybe, just maybe, this could be the Messiah they've been hoping for, for so long. It is against that background, and in that environment, that Matthew writes his gospel.

Of all the gospels, Matthew is the one who uses the most apocalyptic imagery. He is the one who seems closest to the dreams, ideas and fantasies of the Jewish people about how God might come and change their fortunes, liberate them from their oppressors, and pass judgment on those who made life difficult for them at the present time and destroy their enemies.

That's what they expected would happen. That's the background against which Matthew writes his gospel. The expectation of a future where God would flex his muscle, send a Messiah who would change the lives of his people, and destroy their enemies.

It was generally assumed that signs would accompany this change. Signs that would be easy for the righteous to identify so they would know what was happening, and help them boost their confidence that the end was near and they would finally be safe, free and happy ever after. Signs that were to inspire fear in their enemies and make them shake in their boots. Earth tremors, thunder and lightning, and other manifestations of supernatural power providing the righteous with an indication that it was time to start singing God's praises, while reducing their enemies to trembling heaps of fear.

All through Matthew's gospel, there are indications of supernatural involvement. It is clear that something is going on that is beyond the everyday, day-to-day existence of the time. Angels appear, voices, dreams and visions are present in abundance. It is as if Matthew wants to say to those who know about the role these things are expected to play, that the Messiah is coming, the times are changing, God is intervening, it's happening, what we have been expecting for centuries is happening. And it is happening now.

Nowhere in the gospel are the references, the signs, the echoes of apocalyptic literature as strong as they are in the last chapters, and especially around the crucifixion and resurrection. Earth tremors, darkness, thunder and lightning, heavenly messengers, people rising from the dead, it is all happening. And at the centre of it all is one Jesus of Nazareth.

He is not the Messiah as they had expected him, and not what they had been hoping for at all. After all is said and done, the Romans are still in power, still cruelly oppressing, their people still crushed under their might. The world has not changed one bit, nothing of the glorious past to be resurrected is in evidence.

And yet! When Matthew tells the story, he weaves into his story all these signs, all this imagery that they would have already been familiar with from reading the apocalyptic writings. He tries to put them in the right frame of mind for what he will tell them about Jesus. That he is the long-expected Messiah, that God has intervened, but he is different and even more spectacular than they could ever have dreamed of or hoped for. Weaving imagery into his story very much like music in a movie would, today, prepare us for what is to come. To see a certain scene in a certain light and believe something about it that we might not see as easily if the music wasn't there.

What Matthew is doing weaving all this imagery into his story is trying to change the frame of mind of his audience. From indifference to expectation, from not so sure to prepared to open themselves up to the possibility that something life- and earth- shattering happened here. Look, he says, look and see....

Apart from the use of apocalyptic imagery, he plays around with words for looking and seeing in this final chapter of his book. The soldiers, for instance, are witness to supernatural powers coming down from heaven to roll away the stone and open the grave they are supposed to guard. Where they were supposed to be guarding a dead man, they now turn into dead men themselves, while the dead man they were guarding walks out of the tomb they put him in. Their power pales against the superior power of God descending from heaven. Here is a heavenly intervention if ever there was one!

And while they lie dead, the women are told not to be afraid. There is a lot of humour in the way Matthew describes the scene, and the contrast is clear from the start between the righteous, the believers and the women; and the unrighteous, the enemy and the unbelievers. The women see, and with fear and joy run to tell the others, and meet the risen Jesus on their way. The guard doesn't see, and once they gather their wits about them, go and start telling lies.

Weaving in the apocalyptic signs into his story, Matthew creates a sharper contrast between believers and non-believers than the other gospels do. He uses it as a tool to create an even more urgent message for his audience; a message that only Jewish readers and others who were familiar with the apocalyptic genre would have understood.

Look, he says, look and see. Pay attention! The end of history as we know it has arrived, the powers we imagined impossible to defeat have been conquered. The Messiah has come!

No, not a wholesale slaughter of Romans; no, not a political change or change of worldly fortunes for our people, but death itself has lost its power, everything has changed, not just the political scenery of the day, not just the worldly fortunes of our people. Everything has changed!

An innocent man, a man like Moses, like Abraham, like David (remember the sermons about the genealogy?) was sacrificed. Human politics deemed him expendable like so many others in this world are deemed expendable when it comes to keeping the show on the road and protecting the rich and powerful. And you know what? He's back! They haven't been able to shut him up! God intervened and showed where the real power lies when it comes to changing the world. It lies with love and compassion, with righteous living, with gentleness and healing, with a deep peace that doesn't need weapons or violence to maintain it, that doesn't need to kill or shut others out for fear of losing its advantage.

Join us! Believe it! Follow him! Because if we do, it will change the world, make a difference, create the world we have been hoping for, pining for, praying for. Here, on earth, wherever two or three gather together, break bread and commit themselves to being like Jesus, living like Jesus, trusting like Jesus, in the God who leaves the ones that are supposedly in power for dead, while others, even women and children, are inspired to go out and share the good news of his coming. Amen.