Week by week we meet together to break bread in a world that has changed very little during the seven days that separate our memorial meetings. Just occasionally we do so when there has been a dramatic change to the world situation during those intervening days. Examples come to mind such as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, and that of the Six-Day War in June 1967. Prior to that, the dropping of a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, and the outbreak of the Second World War, will be remembered by some who read these words, though not this writer.

Sunday 16 September was another such occasion, for on the previous Tuesday the world was shaken by the dramatic news of the devastating terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre.

"Except ye repent"

When we heard the dreadful news, to what scripture did our minds go? Mine went to Luke 13:1-5, and I contrasted in my mind the words of Jesus in response to two tragedies in his day with those of the religious leaders of our day, who tend on such occasions merely to utter words of profound sympathy and compassion for those affected by the terrorist attack and to deplore the actions of those responsible for it.

Jesus, though not called upon to comment on a terrorist attack, had his attention drawn to a massacre of Galilean pilgrims on the Temple Mount by the Roman authorities. His response was: "Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (vv.2,3). He then referred to another recent tragedy, the collapse of a tower in Siloam, killing eighteen people, and said the same thing. He may have uttered words of compassion for the victims, for we know that he was a man of compassion, but we are not told that he did. Instead there is that twice-repeated statement, “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish”, an appeal notably absent from the responses of the religious leaders of our day.

It is a sad reflection on Christianity today that the sombre truth that we shall all perish unless we turn to God is absent from their teaching, along, of course, with so many other principles of the Truth.

But notice that Jesus said, “ye shall all likewise perish”. What did he mean? The nation did not in fact heed the call to repent, it got worse and worse. About forty years later many more Jews died, massacred by Roman soldiers, or crushed by falling buildings as the Romans set fire to the city. They did indeed “likewise perish” in a far greater tragedy.

Will there be a parallel in our own times? The USA has dominated the world, both militarily and economically, in recent times, especially over the last decade, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of Japan. The terrorists struck at the Pentagon, the centre of US military might, and the World Trade Centre, the centre of US economic might. In the Kingdom that Jesus Christ will set up there will be no place for the economic and military powers of today, and it must all be swept away in a much greater overthrow than that which took place on 11 September.

Ominous phrases of Scripture come to mind: “. . . when He [Yahweh] ariseth to shake terribly the earth” (Isa. 2:19); “. . . in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall” (30:25); “the cities of the nations fell” (Rev. 16:19). We must not, of course, pick phrases out of context just because they sound apt, but I think there is good Scriptural evidence for saying that the destruction that will take place prior to the establishment of the Kingdom will by no means be limited to the overthrow of the armies which invade Israel.

"Beware of covetousness"

Our New Testament readings at the time of the disaster were in fact from the Gospel of Luke, and news of the disaster also made me reflect on another part of the teachings of Jesus, Luke 12:13-21. Here Jesus warns: “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possessest” (v.15). This teaching is in complete contrast to the prevailing philosophy of the Western world today, which puts material gain above everything else.
Jesus then goes on to give what we refer to as the parable of the rich fool. A man concentrates on his farming with such success that he has to build bigger barns to store all his produce; he looks forward to the time when he can sit back and selfishly enjoy it all, only to find that sudden death strikes. People do not store up goods in this way today, and we have to apply the parable to current circumstances. One application would be to those who work long hours in the financial services industry, are paid well, including lavish bonuses, invest their money in high yielding stocks, and look for early retirement, in which they can enjoy the possessions and leisure that money can bring, only to experience sudden death. There must have been thousands of such people in the World Trade Centre when its twin towers collapsed into heaps of smoking rubble, and many must have perished, too late to turn to God.

And we must not fail to take the lesson to ourselves. Christ asks us to serve him now, not at some future time when we have achieved all we want to achieve in this life and have made our material future supposedly secure. The sudden death of so many in that terrible tragedy is a sombre warning of the uncertainty of life, but the end may come equally quickly in the form of a heart attack or a car accident.

“Where moth and rust doth corrupt”
Immediately after the disaster, shares on the British stock exchange plummeted, and for the first time for many years investors actually turned to gold and silver. At the time of writing, the US stock exchange has just opened again, and shares have dropped. Financial commentators are widely expecting the value of investments to drop as people lose confidence in the economy, already moving into recession. A widespread war involving the Middle East could lead to oil scarcities, which would be a further blow to economic confidence.

The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount come to mind: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal!” (Mt. 6:19,20). Again we must interpret the language to fit our current-day situation. In the time of Jesus people would have hoarded up their savings or their treasures at home, perhaps literally under the bed. They could be lost in a sudden break in by a thief, or they could be diminished by the slow processes of rust or rot. People do not, on the whole, today hoard things up at home in this way; instead they invest their money. The value of those investments had already fallen substantially before the World Trade Centre was destroyed, and are likely to decline much further.

In contrast, nothing can diminish the value of “treasures in heaven”, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the hope of life eternal in him, to be obtained when he returns to the earth. What are we giving priority to in our lives: our investments, which will be worthless when Christ returns to the earth, and may drastically lose their value before he comes, or in doing those things that please our heavenly Master, who will reward us with something beyond any calculation in value?

The Apostle Paul likewise exhorts those who are “rich in this world” (and this applies to most of us in the West) not to “trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, Who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). It is good for us to be reminded how uncertain riches really are, that we might learn truly to trust in God.

The value of the Word of God
In times of crisis many people wonder what the world is coming to, and know not where to seek for comfort and guidance. If we have made the Word of God part of our lives, we have such comfort and guidance, and many relevant passages come to our minds.

As an illustration, take the New Testament reading for the Sunday after the disaster, Luke 8. Here we read the Parable of the Sower, in which shallow-rooted plants wither and die in times of trouble. Let us therefore hold fast to the Word of God, keeping it in our minds, that we might bring forth good fruit, even if times of trouble come upon us. Later in the chapter we read of the disciples in the boat on storm-tossed Galilee, but they have no need to fear, for Christ is in the boat with them, and brings calm—a reminder to us that there is no need to be fearful, even when terrible events happen which shake the world and our own lives. Then we see the crazed herd of swine, racing down the steep slope to perish in the waters of the lake, and think what an apt parable this is for our present world, on its way to destruction, obsessed with material gain, and heedless of the moral corruption and environmental damage being inflicted on our planet.
The other readings for that Sunday came from the end of 2 Kings and the early chapters of Ezekiel. Both concern the same time, the time when the kingdom of Judah came to its end, just as our present world is coming to its end. Appropriate lessons can be learned from the Ezekiel reading for that Sunday (chapter 12) and the chapters preceding and following it.

Ezekiel was prophesying not many years before the threatened judgements came, yet there were wicked men in Jerusalem who said, "It is not near [the judgement prophesied by Ezekiel and Jeremiah]; let us build houses: this city is the caldron, and we be the flesh" (11:3). This would appear to mean that they thought of themselves as safe in the city, protected from destruction as flesh is protected by the iron of a caldron from destruction in the flames. The response of the prophet is: "This city shall not be your caldron, neither shall ye be the flesh in the midst thereof; but I will judge you in the border of Israel" (v. 11). They would not find refuge within the walls of the city, they would be dragged outside and meet their end. So people today trust in the financial institutions of our world to protect them, to insure them against the consequences of every evil, to provide investments for a comfortable retirement. But these institutions will be of no use in the troubles that are coming upon the earth.

In the meantime, when prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesied of coming judgement, their message was dismissed as applying only to far-off times to come: "The vision that he [Ezekiel] seeth is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off" (12:27). But the destruction of Jerusalem was near, and the prophecies were soon fulfilled.

Today there is a general belief amongst some religious people that the Bible speaks of a coming end, but little belief that it could be near. Environmentalists warn of the way our current system is ruining the planet, and some economists warn of the instability of the current economic system, but no heed is taken. Now a terrible blow has been struck at our financial institutions, but will the warning be heeded? It is unlikely.

In Ezekiel 13 the prophet goes on to speak of the hopes of peace being like a poorly built wall, whitewashed to look sound, but in fact incapable of withstanding a storm when it comes. The same is true of our present world system. The storms of war have now burst upon the Western world, and if it withstands these there is worse to come, culminating in collapse.

"Lift up your heads"

Time and again in these days we quote the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Mount Olivet Prophecy regarding our troubled times, but they are particularly appropriate regarding the present situation: "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken" (Lk. 21:25,26).

There must be real perplexity amongst the leaders of the West as to what they can really do about terrorism, about fanatics who will sacrifice their lives in order to cause maximum destruction. They are not dealing with a nation, but with amorphous organisations, difficult to track down. And fear has stricken the hearts of many; it was not long after the attacks that airlines began to lay off staff, knowing that many people had become too frightened to fly. Even more widespread seems to be the fear and uncertainty about where our world is going and what will happen to its economic institutions.

But this is precisely the time when, as believers in Christ and his return to the earth, we should look in more confidence for his early return: "And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (v. 28). We look too at the possible significance of such terrible events in bringing about the events which lead to the return of Christ.

"Founded upon a rock"

Returning to Ezekiel 13, the idea of an insecure wall which collapses when a storm comes has some resemblance to the Lord Jesus’s parable of the two builders, the one who built upon a firm foundation of rock so that his house withstood storm and flood, and the one that built upon an insecure foundation of earth, only to find it collapsing into ruins in time of flood (Lk. 6:46-49).

The first builder represents those who take heed to the teachings of Jesus and build their lives on them, the second those that do not. The only secure foundation for our lives is Christ and his teachings, otherwise ruin faces us sooner or later. God is quite often likened to a Rock, something firm and dependable, in the Old
Testament, and the idea is picked up and applied to Christ in the New Testament; indeed there are Old Testament passages of this character that are clearly prophetic of Christ.

One such is quoted in 1 Peter 2: “Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded” (v. 6). Christ is here depicted as the cornerstone of God's work of salvation, and, as Peter remarks, we are like individual stones, built on that foundation, part of a spiritual house for God's glory. This is but one of many passages speaking of the ultimate security of our lives if they are built upon Christ.

Many people immediately after the disaster must have felt very insecure and unsafe, indeed they do so anyway in today's rapidly changing world. For many the old securities have gone; families break up or become widely scattered, the comfort and security of familiar surroundings and old friends is lost as people move all over the place in their work. But we have a security no one can take away from us: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8).

Exposition

The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1-15

D. Moses’ commission—Exodus 3-4 (Part 4)

Mark Vincent

Introduction

Moses, grasping at last the urgency and non-negotiable nature of his calling, bids farewell to his father-in-law in Midian and sets off at God's behest to the land of Egypt. On the way he has a remarkable encounter with an angel, which results in the circumcision of his son. While all this has been going on, God has also appeared to Aaron, commanding him to go to meet the returning Moses. This he does, the two of them meeting at Sinai and returning to Egypt together to summon the elders of Israel and report to them the wonderful news of God's saving plan. With these incidents our examination of Exodus 4 will be complete, and we shall proceed next month to the first encounter of Moses and Pharaoh in Exodus 5.

Moses returns to Egypt

4:18 And Moses went and returned to Jethro, his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace.