



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 19th October 2003
by Mark Ashton

10p

Zechariah 14

The Lord Will Come – Horror and Hope

After reading a passage like Zechariah 14, I often find myself wanting to say, “Well, what do we make of a passage like that?” But, of course, that is not actually the most important question to ask. If the Bible is God’s Word to us, then the most important issue is not “What do we make of it?” But “What does it make of me?”

A young man was taking his girlfriend around a picture gallery hung with Old Masters paintings and, to show off to his girlfriend he was dismissing the pictures one by one in loud and strident tones. In turn, he ridiculed Rembrandt’s portraiture, Turner’s perspective and Renoir’s colours. At last the curator could bear it no more, and, tapping the visitor on the shoulder, he said, “Excuse me, young man, but do you mind me pointing out that you are viewing some of the finest pictures in the world? These canvasses have stood the test of centuries and have been acclaimed by generation after generation of discerning art critics. It is not these pictures that are on trial today. It is you.

Well, to a far greater degree, we must guard ourselves against an attitude to God’s Word that comes critically to Zechariah 14 to see if it has got anything useful to say to twenty-first century Cambridge. It is not this chapter that is on trial. It is us.

Zechariah 14 is a particular style of writing in the Bible known as Apocalyptic, and as we come to our first point, we need to ponder how Apocalyptic works.

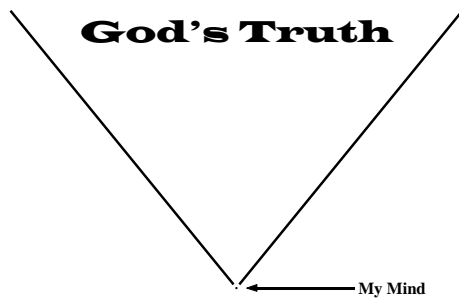
1. The Uniqueness of God’s Activity

Once again we come across a refrain we have already got accustomed to in these final chapters of Zechariah – ‘*On that day*’, 14:1, ‘*A day of the LORD is coming when your plunder will be divided among you.*’ Two weeks ago I suggested that ‘*On that day*’ is intended to focus us more on the nature of God and His activity in the world than on any particular point in human history. In a morning sermon on Revelation, I tried to define ‘Apocalyptic’ as a ‘series of symbolic snapshots of God in action’.

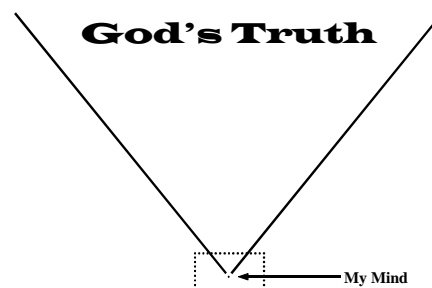
Because these scenes and images that we come across in Apocalyptic literature do not relate precisely to human history, it does not help us if we ask of verse 2, ‘*I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city.*’ for example, ‘When will (or did) this happen? And how is it physically possible for all the nations of the earth to attack a single city simultaneously? Nor are we meant to make precise geographical sense of vv1-5a,¹*A day of the LORD is coming when your plunder will be divided among you.* ²*I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city.* ³*Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle.* ⁴*On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.* ⁵*You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with Him.* or v10, ‘*The whole land, from Geba to Rimmon, south of Jerusalem, will become like the Arabah. But Jerusalem will be raised up and remain in its place, from the Benjamin Gate to the site of the First Gate, to the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hannabel to the royal winepresses.*’ You see, we always want to force God’s activity into our own human frames of reference, whether historical, geographical, psychological or scientific. But notice v 7, ‘*It will be a unique day, without daytime or night-time – a day known to the LORD. When evening comes, there will be light.*’ The point of uniqueness is that it is not like anything else. There can only be one end of

the world, for example. This is a day without comparisons because God's work is incomparable.

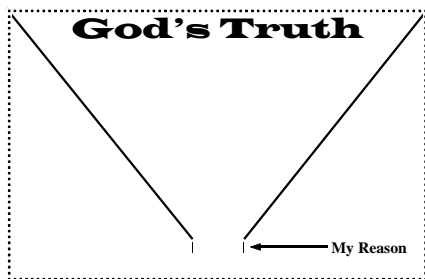
Apocalyptic warns us not to try to conform the activity of God to what is already familiar to us. Apocalyptic means Revealing, or Revelation. And it does reveal. But what it reveals is to some extent beyond our mental grasp. It shows us that how God does things is not how our human reason would do things. Human reason is not able to comprehend the reason of God. It is like a computer being asked to process data far far beyond the space available on its hard drive. So we need to ask, "Are we going to conform God to our knowledge and experience?" Barry Webb talks about 'language stretched to breaking point to describe the indescribable.' And Eugene Petersen pointed out that Apocalyptic essentially engages not with our reason, but with our imagination. It takes the great truths which the rest of the Bible teaches us, and which are in danger of becoming flat and boring sometimes through our own sense of over-familiarity with them, and it sets them in motion before us in an animated and impassioned dance of images and ideas. So those of us who are unaccustomed to (or afraid of) using our imaginations may find Apocalyptic challenging. For example, it is hard to get scientific reason round vv6-7, '*A day like no other day*'. And that is precisely the point. God's action can neither be predicted, nor controlled, nor even be satisfactorily analysed by human reason. God does what He wants, when He wants, and how He wants. But add the human imagination to human reason and it may get us a tiny bit further in grasping God. [Fig.1-4] Does God blow your mind? He should.



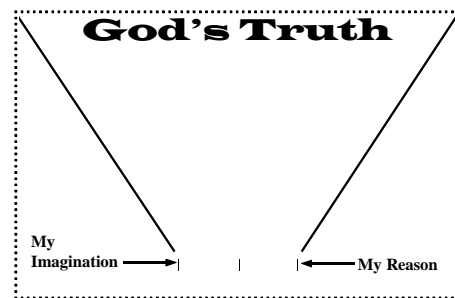
[Fig.1]



[Fig.2]



[Fig.3]



[Fig.4]

So, we need to let the images of this chapter engage our imaginations, without trying to make literal or precise sense of them all. Actually, rather like selecting photos for the family photo album, we are going to have to choose just two or three snapshots from the rest of the chapter and neglect the rest of it, for now. And we would not do it justice if I did not mention -

2 The Horror of God's Activity

These are gruesome and warlike images here that we cannot escape, vv1-2, '*A day of the LORD is coming when your plunder will be divided among you. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city.*' However and whenever God works out His purposes on earth, His people do not escape trial, tribulation and suffering. Judgement we are told in 1 Peter, begins with the household of God. If you are suffering now, don't be surprised – it is not evidence that we are out of God's will – more likely evidence that you are in God's will. But that is not the end of the story, v3, '*Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle.*' And the fate of those who choose to oppose God is dreadful to contemplate, v12, '*This is the plague with which the LORD will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are standing on their feet. Their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.*' You will be grateful that I resisted the temptation to try to provide a clip from the

Indiana Jones film, where the villain drinks from the wrong holy grail and becomes a very good illustration for this verse. But don't let's miss the point: the Bible uses the most frightening language to describe God's judgement – and I guess that is because you and I are tempted not to take it seriously enough, vv13-19, ***“On that day men will be stricken by the LORD with great panic. Each man will seize the hand of another, and they will attack each other. ¹⁴Judah too will fight at Jerusalem. The wealth of all surrounding nations will be collected – great quantities of gold and silver and clothing. ¹⁵A similar plague will strike the horses and mules, the camels and donkeys, and all the animals in those camps. ¹⁶Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. ¹⁷If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD Almighty they will have no rain. ¹⁸If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, they will have no rain. The LORD will bring on them the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. ¹⁹This will be the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.*** What will be true is true: the whole human race divides itself into 2 categories – rebels against God, or worshippers of God. Which are we? Has the thought ever struck us? Would you just ask yourself that question...Am I a rebel...or a worshipper? But if God's judgement is horrific, Zechariah's prophecy ends on a spectacular note of hope0...

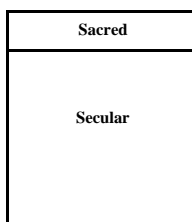
3 The Hope of God's Activity

(a) All the nations. We have already seen from v16 that God's purposes reach out to every people group on earth. But it is vv8+9 that take us to the heart of the matter, v8, ***“On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter.”*** It had always been a problem to get water into Jerusalem. Now spiritual life will flow out of Jerusalem in all directions. Every culture known to archaeology and anthropology has the phenomenon of religion. The 3 great Monotheistic (one God) religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam dominate our world today. But it is God's purpose that He alone will be known as God, v9, ***“The LORD will be King over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.”*** The confusing picture of comparative religion will be resolved. It won't be a case of one God with a hundred names. It will be a case of one God with one name. And it will be name of Jesus. I don't know if you have ever had difficulty assembling something, like say, a tent when you are camping in the summer. And then you discover the knack – the key – perhaps it's to get the upright in the first place or something – and from that moment on you've cracked it and it becomes quite easy. Well, world religions are a puzzle – until you get Jesus in place: at the centre of everything. He is the only way to have a living relationship with God, (vv8a-9). But the final purpose of God is not just for all the nations, but for the whole of human life which I've entitled-

(b)All of Life

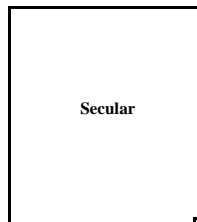
²⁰On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of he horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD'S house will be like sacred bowls in front of the altar. ²¹Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty. Vv20-21. It may seem a strange note of bathos to end to end the book with some random remarks about saucepans and a racist slur. But those words in capitals HOLY TO THE LORD were inscribed on a gold plate that hung on the front of the ornamental robes of the High Priest, the holiest individual in his holiest role. Now the boundary between the holy and the profane is to become meaningless (vv20-21a). Every religion divides human life into the sacred (Holy places, holy things, holy words, holy people) [Fig.5] and the secular (ordinary things etc) [Fig.6]. Secularism tries to drive out religion entirely. Christianity refuses to acknowledge that there is any sphere at all that is not sacred [Fig.7]. Can I ask if you are religious, or Christian in your thinking? For the Christian the default setting of this world is sacred. We believe what the angel says in Revelation 11:15, ***“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our LORD and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever***

Religion:



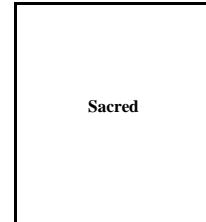
[Fig.5]

Secularism:



[Fig.6]

Christianity:



[Fig.7]

That is why our worship is not what we do in this building, but it is what we do with our entire lives. Just after my conversion I worked on some boys' camp under a very wise senior leader who used to say to teenagers when they got converted, 'Don't tell your parents'. It was fine to tell your friends and your teachers but he used to advise them to live a new life at home and wait for their parents to ask. Parents and siblings are the ones who know us so well, they

notice at once if our lives change. Start to do the washing up, have a Bible by the bed, stop squabbling over the TV and they'll be asking within a week. Because Christianity is not confined. Our worship is the whole of our lives. It will not be our religious practices. It will be everything.

What we begin to experience now as Christians will prove to be a foretaste of God's ultimate purpose for the world.

So the book ends on this note. In the Hebrew Zechariah ends with those same familiar words '*On that day*'. We read in the book of Ezra that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were sent to encourage God's people when the people were fearful and neglecting to do what God wanted them to do. Zechariah was effective in his preaching because he focussed his first hearers on what God was up to. I hope he has done that for us too. Do we need encouragement? – to persevere? Then let's forget what we're doing and look at what God is doing '*On that day.*'

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)