

“Anti-Christ, the end and more.” Mark 13:24-37

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore, stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

There is something very, very important that I need to tell you. It is regarding the second coming of Jesus. The Last Day. What if I told you that now we know exactly when it will happen? That we do know the exact time of Jesus' return...

But before we proceed, let's examine ourselves, let us ask ourselves these two questions. First – what would it change for me and you if the time of Jesus coming was before the end of next year?

Would you change something in how you go about your life? Would you rush to prepare for this day? Would you seek reconciliation with others? Would you become abundantly generous? Would you repent and turn away from your secret sins? Would you devote yourself to prayers and rush to proclaim the Gospel to your loved ones? What would it change for you if the day of Jesus' return was that close?

Second – what would it change for me and you if we knew that the time of Jesus coming was in the middle of the next century? How would that knowledge change your life? Your attitudes? Your actions? Your priorities? How would you lead the rest of your life? What would be in the centre of your life? What would you strive for?

Think about these questions seriously! Now, the truth is that **“concerning that day or that hour, no one knows...”**. One purpose of these questions is for us to reflect deeply and honestly – are we awake? Are we keenly waiting for the return of our Master, or maybe we don't care about it much at all?

Another purpose of these questions is to illustrate that what we believe about the time of Jesus' glorious return inevitably influences our Christians lives, our attitudes, our priorities and so on. It does.

Fine, but if we don't know the day or hour, is there anything that is revealed about the last days before Jesus' glorious return? Of course. **Let's look at two topics. Signs of the end times and the anti-Christ.**

First, the signs. The Gospel text that we heard today is a section of a longer speech of Jesus. Jesus' teaching was as a response to the disciples' questions regarding the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Last Days. Jesus replied to these two questions in two parts.

The first part of Jesus' answer addresses the question of the destruction of the Temple. And the second part addresses the question of the Last Days, of the time of Jesus' return. So, what did He say? What do we know?

You know from your own experience that to learn and to understand the signs of the end times is one of these exciting topics that can easily capture the imagination and attention of Christians and even non-Christians.

Which of the signs have already been fulfilled? Which signs can we see being fulfilled today? How many are left unfulfilled? What about this one? What about that one? How much longer before Jesus returns? Fascinating, isn't it?!

As we read Gospel accounts and try to piece together what Jesus was teaching with the additional information that the apostles provided in their writings, one is clear... It is not an easy task. The answer is not exactly obvious.

For centuries and millennia, the brightest and the most blessed students of the Scripture have been praying for the light of the Holy Spirit to illuminate them, trying to formulate the right answers to the end times questions.

They have not reached a full consensus. It all comes down to carefully evaluating every possible argument in the light of the Scripture, sifting away those that are contradictory and keeping those that seem to fit together the best.

The teaching of my today's sermon is largely based on the line of argumentation that is carefully elaborated by Dr Jeffrey Gibbs and Dr James Voelz, two of the leading NT scholars today. This is how they summarize Jesus' teaching about the end times.

They show that Jesus indeed answers these two questions – on the destruction of the Temple, and then on the last times. When Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple, He mentions signs that will help His disciples to know when the destruction of Jerusalem is near – so that they can flee to safety.

Then Jesus answers the second question, regarding the end times. There are only a few verses of His answer in the gospel according to Mark, Matthew puts in much more extra information. As Jesus moves to answer the second question there is one

word, one idea that summarizes His teaching on the end times. Is it not a date, it is not even about the signs. Jesus doesn't mention any specific signs that would help us to determine when He is to return. The word is – **suddenly. Unexpectedly.**

That's it... No one knows when. **“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.”**

Most of the warnings of Jesus, as well as the descriptions of the Church's history in the Book of Revelation refer to the entire period between Jesus' ascension and His second coming at the end of the age.

Those are the signs that will accompany the Church throughout the ages. Such as wars and rumours of wars. Natural disasters. False teachers in the Church. Persecution of the faithful. Divisions caused by faithfulness to Jesus that will tear apart families, and so on. All of that has been, is and will be happening.

But that is not the end yet. What does this mean for us? This is great news that brings us much peace and comfort. How? On the one hand, we don't need to worry about the signs, have we understood them, maybe we have missed something? All the anxiety trying to figure out “when” ... it is taken away. We can't miss anything.

On the other hand, the suddenness of Jesus coming effectively deals with our complacency. There is no place for it, for we know that Jesus will come **suddenly and unexpectedly**, and we need to be awake and ready every day. Every day!

But are there any signs, anything that we should be aware of, anything that we should watch out for? The answer is – yes. There is. Something that the Holy Spirit warns us about. **That's our second topic. The great deception.** It has many names.

Paul calls it the son of destruction, the man of lawlessness, the mystery of lawlessness, John calls it the great prostitute, Babylon the great, the dragon, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth, and probably most famously in his letter John the apostle calls it – **the anti-Christ**, it comes with the number of the beast, which is also the number of a man, namely – 666.

This evil power, this evil intelligence has been waging war against God's people since the beginning. And, despite that – here we are! But as the Holy Spirit warns us through the apostles, at the end this evil power will manifest itself openly. And that is going to be an interesting combination.

This much is clear. The anti-Christ will take his seat in the temple of God, of all places, meaning, in the Church. And it will combine both, the secular powers and the religious powers to battle against the true God and His Church.

But don't look for someone who looks mean and terrifying. Look for the very opposite. The man of lawlessness will look like a lamb. It will come speaking about love and compassion, and acceptance, and care, and unity, etc.

It will present itself as a lamb, but it will replace the truth of the Word, the beautiful Law as God's good design for His creation and the pure Gospel of forgiveness, with the very opposite. I believe that we already see this emerging.

Where can we see this? Right before our eyes. I think that what we witness in the world today is not so much political unrest, or just cultural unrest, as it is the great spiritual battle. We can see how the good order given by our God and protected by His Commandments is systematically destroyed and replaced.

There is unseen and growing organized hostility towards Christianity and the Triune God, while other deities and religions are gladly embraced. The foundation of the society, the family, is under constant attack. The boundaries for the protection of the gift of life are removed one after another.

Sexual desires and promiscuity have been elevated as something that defines our very identity, and these ideas are advanced and forced on society with religious zeal by global political and corporate structures.

Language is not used to serve our neighbours anymore; it has become means of manipulation. Coveting is called motivation and so on. None of this is done calling this rebellion for what it is.

To the contrary, these profound changes, this open rebellion against the Triune God is covered with clothes of new and pleasantly sounding virtues. "We must do this for the sake of freedom, and love, and equality, and inclusion, and tolerance, and justice, and safety, for a better society."

What these very good words actually hide is – the deliberate subversion of God's good order. Many have noticed that the supporters of this new-man made religion act as fervently as religious fanatics – don't you dare to question their dogmas! And the heretics, who oppose them, will be without mercy burned at the fiery stake of media and public opinion!

This is the battle against the Creator that we can witness emerging in the secular world. But what is worse, that the same false ideas are embraced by many Christians, including some of our brothers and sisters in our LCA.

As the society replaces God's Law with their new order, many churches and well-meaning, but not so well-equipped Christians, have jumped on this train. They have abandoned God's Law and replaced it with the above-mentioned secular and anti-Christian set of new values.

What is much worse – they have lost the Gospel. They have replaced the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness with the other gospel of inclusivity and acceptance, which is no gospel at all. But it is the Word of God, proclaimed as the Law and the Gospel, that for now restrains the mystery of lawlessness.

Now we can see churches voluntarily giving up the true Gospel so that they can sound and appear attractive to the secular world. This sickness spreads rapidly. We can see how the current pope embraces and promotes worldly ideologies.

Notice! Someone, who sits in the temple of God, and looks like a lamb, but speaks like a dragon. Many in the Roman Catholic Church have raised their voices of protest. Some already have paid the price and lost their positions.

What we can see unfolding today is how the secular political and economic powers, and the false religious powers join their hands against the Holy One, who sits in heavens. I think this is what the number of the beast – 666 – signifies.

The unholy alliance, inspired by the devil, when the secular political and financial powers of this world and the false religious powers join together to create a new man-designed order. The Holy Spirit warns us that so many will be deceived... those who don't want to listen to the truth of the Scripture.

But then, **suddenly, unexpectedly...** the world will be going about its business as usual, people saying, **"There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them [...] and they will not escape.**" (1 Thess. 5:3)

What does this mean for us, Brothers and Sisters? Shall we fear? No... not at all. Just, stay awake! Jesus Himself still teaches us. The Holy Spirit Himself still enlightens us. We still have the pure Word of God received from the apostles.

Jesus hasn't abandoned us, and He never will. Let's hold to the truth of the Word, by God's grace, and let's strive to be faithful to our Master, as if Jesus was coming back any day. For He may be coming back any day...

We know how the grand story of humanity ends. Our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ has received all authority that there is. He has rescued us and marked us for Himself. He has promised to be with us every day until the end of this age.

When that Day comes, He will gather His people, His beloved siblings and will bring us into the Kingdom that was prepared for us before the foundation of the world. This is His promise to you, this is our joyful Christian hope.

New life without sin and death and suffering, without the devil and his lies and temptations. Magnificent New Heavens and New Earth, and our glorious God, Jesus Christ with us. Visibly. And we with Him, transformed to be like Him.

"The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps 27:1)

Amen.