

Readings

Mark 13:24-end

Isiah 64:1-9

Cor. 1:3-9

The Day and Hour Unknown

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a day in which the church calendar calls us to think about the past, present and future. As we enter this time when we celebrate the time of Jesus's birth, we also look at His second coming.

In our reading Jesus is talking to his disciples in private on the Mount of Olives. He had already told them that no stones of the temple would be left standing, denoting the future fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. His disciples asked when this would happen, and Jesus told them not to listen to those who claimed to know when this would be or to be surprised if dreadful things happened. He told them to be on their guard as people would persecute them but that the Holy Spirit would help them. Jesus also told them the Gospel would be spoken to all nations and those who kept following Him would be saved.

These passages also include information about another future event, when Christ returns to take his true church from earth, sometimes known as the Rapture.

Years ago, we had received teaching on the Rapture and had watched a video called Left Behind. It made my husband Ivan and I think. A few days later it was sunny, and Ivan was busy in the front garden and the dog was basking in the sun. I had to nip out in the car and left them to it. When I returned half an hour later – the front door was open, the lawn mower was in the middle of the lawn still plugged in and the dog was agitated. The garage door was half open. No sign of Ivan. I shouted – no reply. I thought he had been raptured and I was left behind!

We may laugh but we do not know the day nor the hour of the rapture, or the second coming of Jesus.

The second coming of Jesus can be described as one event consisting of two phases and is similar to how the Old Testament predicted His first coming to earth as a human. The Old Testament prophets often spoke as if the Messiah's coming was a single event, but the fulfilment of those prophecies is seen firstly as his coming by birth to eventually die for sins and secondly his coming to reign on earth at the end of time as we know it.

The second coming and end time events have been discussed, written about and debated over time and unless a scholar difficult to understand.

Simplified

The first stage involves Christ's return at an unexpected time to take his true church from earth. This would happen prior to the antichrist's rise to power and God's end-time judgments on the earth.

The second stage would be Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation which will be at an expected time that is after certain cosmic signs (described in Mark 13:24-25 and the other reading today from Isaiah 64) and a certain time period. At that time, he will destroy the wicked and begin his reign on earth.

William Barclay in his commentary on this passage from Mark's gospel, says that 'when we read the pictorial words of Jesus about the second coming we must remember that he is giving us neither a map of eternity nor a timetable to the future, but that he is simply using the language and the pictures that many a Jew knew and used for centuries before him'.

Christ's urgent warning to be always spiritually ready for his coming at the unknown time applies to all generations of Christians before the tribulation. It should provide strong motivation for remaining true to our faith in Christ and commitment to the standards of his Word.

I was reminded of when I was a student nurse in the army and each week Matron, and the Commanding Officer would do an inspection round of each of the wards. We knew the day and the time but not which wards they would go to. Everywhere in the Nightingale type ward had to be spic and span including the patients! We waited in eager expectation of when they would come with runners in the corridor to warn us when they were on their way. We had to be prepared!

Years later when I was in teaching and an OFSTED inspection was looming, days and weeks were spent hectically getting all the systems records, lesson plans and scheme of work up to date. Then the inspectors arrived, and we were all prepared and ready but again we did not know which class they would go into and which teacher would be inspected.

Both these examples show a bit of panic at being ready but in truth we should have been up to speed, with a ward fit to be inspected anytime and the correct college systems already in place. Human nature being what it is, at times we do enough to get by and hope it will do.

Jesus is telling us we must be ready for His coming. We must live our lives as if He is going to come tomorrow. I was reminded last week when listening to J. John on the radio of one of the heroes of the Christian faith. Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury a committed evangelical Anglican who held strong views about the second coming which gave him an enthusiasm for the evangelism of Jews. I remember learning about him in social history at school but did not realise that as a child he was entrusted to the care of the family housekeeper who shared her Christian faith with him. In the 19th Century, during six decades of public service with over fifty years as an MP Lord Shaftesbury fought successfully against an enormous range of injustices and supported legislation to: -

- outlaw children working in industry
- prevent the employment of women and children down coal mines,

- end small boys as chimney sweeps
- tackle the evil of the opium trade.

He also promoted the 'ragged schools' to educate the poor.

Although the benefits of these initiatives are evident to us, they were not so at the time: Lord Shaftesbury frequently found himself opposed by those who found his proposals harmful to the economy. Many of the battles that Lord Shaftesbury fought are now history. In the United Kingdom there are no women miners or child chimney sweeps, but other injustices remain.

Today the promise Jesus gave to his disciples that the Holy Spirit will help them, is for us too. In these days of Covid 19, lockdown, regional restrictions and uncertainty, the Holy Spirit can help us to use our gifts and talents to further the work of God's Kingdom here on earth. Nothing is too small or little in God's eyes, God can do amazing things through the small things we do in obedience to Him

If Advent looks back to the first coming of Jesus it also looks forward to his coming again and our need to be ready to greet him then. Let us discover what God is saying to us as individuals, rediscover your gifts and talents that God has given to you. Even in these tough times we can live the life God wants for us through Jesus and with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As we reflect on the present moment; to examine the life we are living, and then ask ourselves, have we received the joy Jesus offers, and are we ready to welcome Him should He return here and now? Consider what God is saying about your past, your present and your future in other words what Advent is saying to you.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth nearly 2000 years ago, I say to you today on the 29th November 2020.

'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

(1 Cor. 1:3-9)

It does not matter if you are a housekeeper or a Lord, God can use you today.

Questions

1. Can you identify the cosmic signs identified in Mark 13:24-25 and Isaiah 64:1-9?
2. Identify any injustices found today locally, nationally and globally. How as Christians can we support those who seek to tackle these injustices?
3. Consider the gifts and talents that God has given you. Are these being used to further the work of God's Kingdom here on earth?
4. Are you prepared to allow God to equip you to enable you to fulfil the destiny, He has for your life?