

Advent Sunday Matthew 24 v 36-44 The unexpected arrival
Advent 1 - December 1, 2019

Advent is the start of a season when unexpected visitors just feel like they can drop in, don't they? And if you're anything like the Davies's you'll be completely unprepared with the house looking like a train wreck: the sort of cheerful untidiness any family can produce in a matter of seconds!! And suddenly there's a ring at the doorbell. On one occasion it was the 'posher' side of the family - my late mum had warned us that they were in the area and might just pop in, but as often happens these days I'd completely forgotten! Oops...

So you have to imagine the next five minutes - calmly suggesting the visitors have a quick look around - in the garden if it's not too chilly - to get a good look at the vicarage from the outside and the problems we've been having with drainage or the new power unit for Sue's lift (Joel thankfully around to be dispatched to do the honours there) - and then

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inside having to move quickly into 'whirling dervish' mode, to tidy everything up. Within minutes all is clear (although *where* it gets hidden in nobody's business), Everything *looks* tidy enough (just) - Joel now retreats into his bedroom as any sensible person would, & tea - in proper cups and saucers (managed to find them at the back of one of the cupboards) - is produced and the visit goes ahead.

Well while you might be able to tidy a house in a few minutes - if you absolutely must - but what you can't do is reverse the direction of a whole life, a whole history, a whole culture. By the time the doorbell rings on *this* visit, you're way, way too late. And that's what this passage in Matthew is all about

We have to understand that a great many readers have seen in Matthew a warning to Christians to be ready for the *second* coming - the return - of Jesus.

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We've been promised in the first chapter of Acts and Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and many, many other passages, that one day, when God remakes the entire world, Jesus himself will take centre stage. He will 'appear' again, as Paul and John put it. And since nobody knows when this is going to happen, it's vital that all Christians should be constantly ready - and living right.

That's one of the many reasons for keeping short accounts with God - not hanging onto the darker, nastier stuff in our lives and letting it fester - with the help of regular worship and fellowship, prayer, reading scripture, healthy self-examination and Christian obedience - that's why it all matters as much as it does.

So it's possible to read these passages in different ways. What's so amazing about Scripture is that God can be communicating in ways the original writers hadn't even imagined - which is

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why it's so relevant to our lives today - although you need to hang onto a clear sense of what they *did* mean, so as not to abuse the Bible and make it prove all kinds of things it clearly doesn't.

So these last weeks we've spent time trying to read Luke's gospel as it would've been heard by his *first* audience. And now with a new Christian Year, it's the gospel writer Matthew's turn - and we start by going back to the great crisis that was going to sweep over Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside at a date *unknown* to them Aha! But **we** know it to be 70AD - at the climax of the war between Rome and Judaea. Something was going to happen that would devastate people's lives, families, whole communities - something that was both a terrible, frightening event in history and also, at the same time, the event that was to be seen as the coming of the Son of Man - the *parousia* - the royal appearing of King Jesus himself.

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And the whole passage says that it will be the swift and unexpected sequence of events that will end with the destruction of Jerusalem and - the Temple.

So much for a bit of background - what can we learn on this Advent Sunday?

Well **first** nobody knows when events are going to happen - they just know it's likely to be sometime soon. **Second** life will go on as normal right up until the last minute - & that's the point of Matthew's parallel with Noah's time when a flood came to sweep everything away when ordinary life was carrying on as if nothing was going to happen. **Third** (and we've had this one before, haven't we?) it will divide families and work colleagues right down the middle. 'One will be taken and the other left' probably *doesn't* mean (as some have suggested) that one person will be taken away by God in some kind of supernatural salvation, while the other is left to face destruction. If anything, it's

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the opposite: when invading forces sweep through a town or village, they will take some off to their deaths, and leave others untouched. You might have watched the film 'Schindler's List' where the Camp Commandant picked off the Jews, killing them arbitrarily with his rifle from a balcony. No-one had any idea who was likely to be next.

But the result - and this is something Jesus is anxious to get across to his disciples, who must have been really puzzled as to what was going on - is that his followers must stay alert and awake, - like people who know that there are going to be surprise visitors coming sooner or later, even if they don't know exactly when.

Okay so this warning was primarily directed to the situation of dire emergency of the first century - after Jesus' death and resurrection, and before all his prophecies about the Temple all came

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true. But it also rings true through all the years since and into our own day - that's the amazing thing about Scripture. Because (& don't we know it), *we* also live in turbulent, precarious times, don't we? Who knows what's going to happen next week, or next year? A typhoon, the crashing of a plane, a terrorist attack.

When I was teaching over in Southern Ireland in the late 90s their Celtic Tiger economy was buoyant - and then, suddenly, they were in dire straits - everyone wanting to leave because there weren't any jobs. We really don't know what's around the corner. So it's up to each church, and each individual Christian, to answer Jesus' question. Are you ready? Are you awake? Am I?

We need to be pushing forward together - keeping alert - not just because life throws lots of 'curve balls' at us - but because the way events

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seem to combine and conspire sometimes lets us in on a spiritual reality: that the “dark powers that be” aren’t particularly enamoured of a community of Christians - parishes in a ministry area getting serious about Jesus - and about mission and outreach - and serving; deepening in their discipleship and love for one another.

So on this first bright Sunday in Advent here’s a serious ‘big fat slap’ as one of my northern student friends from Oxford used to colourfully put it - to keep us honest, prayerful, considerate, holy, forgiving of one another - alert and watchful, but also calm & trusting - amidst the turmoil of change and challenge.

Now you should probably know by now (!) that I’m a great fan of C.S. Lewis who died the same day as Kennedy & Aldous Huxley - 56 years

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ago now. In the *Magician's Nephew* - one of the Narnia books, Lewis describes a wood, which the children reach - by magic. It's a kind of 'non-place' - which Polly and Digory come to call 'the Wood between the worlds'. In thisd enchanted wood, time stands still, and they can hardly begin to imagine the trials and adventures facing them in the many different worlds they get to visit from there. (You have to read the book!)

Jane Williams says Advent is a bit like that that 'wood between the worlds'. It's a point on the Christian calendar where we stand between two worlds: the one that cannot imagine Christ; and the world in which Jesus comes to be the *only* picture of reality we have. At this point, we stand in a world where God's great act of incarnation and redemption is just a shadow, a child growing in the womb - secretly - in the dark. We don't yet know

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what this child will be like, or what his impact on our lives will be.

So Advent is a time of preparing to *choose* again. (& at a time of huge choices we're being asked to make in a couple of weeks). Which world will we choose? The world of a baby King, where so many of our dearly held notions about God and ourselves will be challenged; turned upside down. Or will we choose the old, oh so familiar world – where there's no life, no birth – but at least there is also no challenge to change anything.

The other thing about the 'wood between the worlds' is that it's a place of great *drowsiness*, because it's not a real place – and both Matthew and Romans warn us that the danger of the waiting period is sleep, oblivion, unpreparedness. It's very easy to live as though our world is real and secure – and that there's no need to be watchful or poised for action. But the message from these readings

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coming loud and clear is not to go to sleep – not right now – any minute the alarm will go off.

And then did you notice Isaiah’s own longing that’s expressed in the last verse of the Old Testament reading: “Oh house of Jacob”, he pleads, “come let us walk in the light of the Lord”

Today is Advent Sunday – ‘advent’ - a word derived from the Latin ‘adventus’ meaning ‘coming’ or ‘arrival’. Choosing between worlds, between notions of what’s ‘real’ is not easy. It needs to be prepared for and imagined, over and over again. When this child is born in quiet obscurity; when Jesus the King comes again in power and glory – will it be a shock of anguish, or of joy? “Even so Come Lord Jesus!” **AMEN**