

The Bigger Picture

If people know anything about Advent, they know it's the time when we prepare for Christmas. Today, children will be opening the first little window on their Advent calendars, more concerned that there's a chocolate nestling in the little space than any message the window might contain, or you may have a more elaborate Advent hanging, with pockets for even bigger sweets or gifts. Or it might be a candle that you burn, a notch each day (unless you forget and have to burn several days' worth in one go). But whatever you choose, they all serve the same purpose – helping us to count down to the Big Day. The day when we celebrate Christ's birth, his first coming.

Advent is also a time when we hold Carol Services, singing the great carols which have been passed down through generation to generation and listening to traditional readings from the Bible. Readings that tell us the 'backstory' - that what happened to Jesus, and even more importantly *through* Jesus, was the fulfilment of Israel's scriptures. The Bible of the day told a great, sprawling story - of God and the world, God and Israel, God and the hoped-for-future. And, our readings for the Sundays in Advent, leading up to Christmas, do just the same, this year from the gospel of Matthew. And, in those readings, we see very clearly that the great, sprawling story reaches its appointed goal with Jesus himself. Like Luke, from where many of our traditional readings for carol services come, Matthew tells us that if we want to understand Jesus, and particularly in Advent if we want to understand him *better*, we have to go back to the Law, the Prophets and the Writings – to the whole ancient scripture of God's people.

In particular, Israel's scriptures were pointing to one great 'arrival'. Many in Jesus' day were expecting a 'Messiah' – a national leader, a warrior king maybe. But behind and underneath this hope there was a deeper hope again. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel and, in the more recent period, prophets like Zechariah and Malachi, had insisted that one day *God himself would come back to 'visit and redeem his people'*. So, when we read the story of Jesus, this is indeed what we are witnessing, even though our Gospel accounts don't contain the kinds of things that people had imagined when they thought of the glorious return of Israel's God. They would never have imagined God coming in the form of a baby, and growing to be the deeply, fully, gloriously human being of Jesus of Nazareth. A character who is loving, caring, helping and healing – as well as someone who challenges those who dig their toes in and refuse to

come onside with God's rescuing project. But Matthew shows us that this *is* what Israel had been waiting for, what indeed the whole world had been waiting for.

With that 'first Advent', it was clear that God's rescue operation for humans and the world had decisively begun, but not yet completed. Jesus really did launch God's kingdom 'on earth as in heaven' in his public ministry, his death and his resurrection. But it was clear, because of the sort of thing this kingdom was, that it would then need to make its way through the humble, self-giving service of Jesus' followers, until the time when Jesus would return to finish the work, to put all things right, to banish evil and death forever, and bring heaven and earth completely together. The 'second Advent' then overlaps with the first. We celebrate Jesus' first coming, and use that sense of fulfilment to fuel our hope for his second coming and to strengthen us to work for signs of that kingdom in our own day. We live between the first Advent and the second. That is one way of saying what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And as we work our way through our Advent readings in the weeks to come, Matthew challenges us to ask what it means for each one of us to walk with Jesus in our own world.

Our reading today urges us to '*keep watch*'; or to '*be alert*'. I don't know about you but I really don't like surprises that much. Surprise visitors always worry me the most, particular as the weekend approaches, as the house gets more and more untidy. Bits and bobs get left around, the dishwasher needs filling, the washing basket starts to overflow, and everywhere seems to need a good clean. I always fear a surprise visitor on a Friday evening! Not just one at the door – that would be fine – and even into my study would be ok as people expect a vicar's study to look 'lived in', or 'worked in' (and mine certainly doesn't disappoint!), but a visitor into the rest of the house? I would be asking Martyn to stall them in the hallway while I quickly dashed ahead to tidy and put things away.

But whereas you can tidy a room in a few minutes if you put your mind to it, you can't so easily reverse the direction of a whole life, a whole culture. By the time the ring on the doorbell happens, it's too late. And that's what this difficult passage from Matthew 24 is all about.

In his book '*Advent for Everyone: A Journey through Matthew*', the great theologian Tom Wright says that this passage has been applied to two

different kinds of events, neither of which, he believes, was what Jesus himself had in mind. So let's look at these first.

On the one hand, a great many readers have seen in this passage a warning for Christians to be ready for the second coming of Jesus, supported by an interpretation of the earlier part of the chapter which sees the 'coming of the Son of Man' as his return to earth. We have been promised that when God remakes the entire world, Jesus will take centre stage. Since no-one knows when that will be, it's vital that Christians should be ready at all times.

On the other hand, Wright argues, many other readers have seen here a warning to Christians to be ready for their own death. Whatever we think might happen immediately after death – a subject devout Christians have argued over for centuries – it's clearly important that we should in principle be ready for that great step into the unknown, and whatever is asked of us. That's one of many reasons why keeping a short account with God, through regular worship, prayer, reading of scripture, self-examination and following in the way of Jesus, matters as much as it does.

You can read the passage in either of these ways, or both, says Wright. But it's always vital to read the passage as it would have been heard by Matthew's first audience. So, what was going on at that time? Well, a great national crisis was going to sweep over Jerusalem and its surrounding countryside at a date that was, to them, in the unknown future, though we now know it happened in AD 70, at the climax of the war between Rome and Judaea. Something was going to happen which would devastate lives, families, whole communities: something that was a terrible, frightening event, and at the same time an event that was to be seen as 'the coming of man', the Parousia, the 'royal appearing of Jesus himself'. And the whole passage indicates what this will be. It will be the sudden and swift sequence of events that will end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The point this passage makes comes in three stages.

First, nobody knows exactly when this will be, only that it will be within a generation.

Second, life will go on as normal right up to the last minute.

Third, it will divide families and work colleagues right down the middle. When invading forces sweep through a town or village, they will take some off to their deaths and some will be left untouched. That was how it was.

The result – and this is the point Jesus is most anxious to get across to his disciples, who by this stage must have been quite puzzled as to where it was all going – is that his followers must stay awake. They must keep alert and keep watch – like people who know that surprise visitors are coming sooner or later but who don't know exactly when.

The warning was primarily directed to the situation of dire emergency in the first century, after Jesus' death and resurrection and before his words about the temple came true. But they ring through subsequent centuries, and into our own day. We too live in turbulent times. Who knows what will happen next week, next month, next year? We are facing a general election at a time of great distrust in our political leaders, with huge issues at stake such as our place in Europe, the future of the NHS and social care, and the impact of climate change, to name but a few. Like Matthew's first audience, you might well feel that we too are in the middle of national and global crises.

Indeed, Brian McLaren, a leading voice in contemporary Christianity argues that the great work of this generation must be to respond to the quadruple threats or crises inherited from previous generations. He lists these as, firstly, an ecological crisis that, left unchecked, will lead to catastrophic environmental collapse; secondly, an economic crisis of obscenely increasing inequality that exploits or excludes the world's poor; thirdly, a socio-political crisis of racial, ethnic, class, religious and political conflict that could lead to catastrophic war; and fourthly, a spiritual and religious crisis in which the religious institutions that should be helping us deal with the first three fail to grasp that they have a responsibility to make a positive contribution. To save the world from this quadruple threat, he argues, is the great work for which all people of faith and goodwill, including Christians living between the first and second Advent, must be mobilised. It isn't a time to stick our heads in the sand and carry on as normal. We cannot pretend that everything is well.

Although our passage from Matthew's gospel may seem scary at first, it suggests that if we choose well, we have nothing to fear. Choosing well will help us to live hopefully, and that is what Advent is often referred as – the season of hope. We make choices every day, some very simple but others of far greater importance and consequence, such as how we vote. So, at this start

of Advent and in our current context, there may be questions we want to consider, individually and collectively. How can we make choices to live well in this period between the first and second Advent? How do we use the choices we have to work for a better future, not just for us, but for the world we inhabit and for those who are more vulnerable than we? And how do we ensure that we're alert to what Jesus is calling us to do and to be as his true followers in the twenty-first century?

Let's pray:

God for whom we watch and wait,
give us patience and courage
as we keep looking for signs of the times
and for what you are doing in the world
so that we might join in.

In Jesus' name, **Amen.**