

Renew us in hope

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne Advent 1, 2016 St James Lower Hutt

Keynote Bible passage: Matthew 24.36 – 44

Every year I look forward with anticipation to celebration of Christmas and the birth of Jesus, this being the first Advent (coming). Surely we all do, although we might have a mind for ones who have lost loved ones in the course of the year, or remember them at this time. By and large though it is a time for joy and family sharing.

Along with this there is focus on the '*Second Advent*', of Jesus' promised coming again. Today's theme of 'Hope' is a reminder of how we might anticipate this. Ideally it should be one of joyful anticipation with the picture of Christ coming in glory, as the Scriptures mention. In practice though it can bring uncomfortable feelings when the signs of the end of the age are taken into account. From today's gospel it suggests that from every-day life - eating and drinking and marrying and given in marriage, there will come events that stop one in one's tracks. Matthew's gospel recalls how it was in the days of Noah, of a massive flood, and seemingly innocent people perishing. Likewise it suggests there will be similar occurrences before the Son of Man, Jesus comes again. It would seem some will survive and some will not. There's a similar motif in the parable of the ten bridesmaids, some of whom were ready when the bridegroom came, and some were not.

Then there's the prophecy about *natural events* of the earth, earthquakes and famines, floods, (we might include tsunamis), wars and rumours of wars, nations against nations and false prophets. These are described as 'the beginning of the birth-pangs', suggesting more to come. (Matthew 24.8). All this comes under the theme of the apocalypse and there's no lack of dramatic writing and movies portraying possible scenarios.

Where are we in such a timeline? Adventist churches are probably the most likely to bring reminders of possible connections in the present day. They consider contemporary events and find some similar scriptural context. They name some countries now as like those of 2000+ years ago. Some point to the dangers of economic systems in our world. It may be uncertainty behind some of the fears expressed in the recent US elections highlights this. We might think we are strong, but then comes something that triggers fear and anxiety, we are frail indeed. For example the effect of a fall in the sharemarket, petrol spiralling in price, a war in a strategic place, or a natural disaster, and we realise we are not all that secure.

What then are we to make of this? To what extent does it fit with scripture? This is where my uncomfortable feelings arise. From this may I share three considerations as to how we might live with hope and respond in these 'end-times' as described.

- 1) First a word about *timing* – as today's gospel warns 'the Son of Man will come at an unexpected hour'. The disciples of Jesus asked him when the events would take place. They are told this is entirely in the hands and purposes of God. Thus not even the earthly Jesus knew. What I find helpful here is rather than consider chronological timing, we consider it in the *kairos*, the timing of God. We are conditioned to living in chronological time – most of us live by our watches, or the accurate time on our cell-phone. If we didn't there would be chaos – people would be totally confused. However there's times when I try to live by another form of time – with a sense of timelessness. Putting aside one's watch to simply 'be'. In a recent time away I did just this – standing on the side of a river waiting for whitebait to come into the net, albeit to no avail. I was amazed on getting back to my lodgings, some two hours had passed. Or more obviously spiritual focussed to simply sit and reflect. I'd been given a book on what is described as Centering prayer. So to read a chapter then reflect, sensing being in the presence of the Divine. The idea of this prayer is to get past the 'thinking' one does in composing prayers, be it intercession or thanksgiving. The writer highlights the effect of our thinking dominating our minds. But if we can get behind

those thoughts, whether relevant or not, is the 'centering' and to then be aware of the presence of the Divine. Put in a simple way I describe it as 'daydreaming with God'. And in so doing, one enters a sense of timelessness. Perhaps this has been your experience, even if you've not thought of it as prayer. As we engage in this it is glimpsing something of the kairos timing of God. It reminds of the Psalmist's insight, 'One day in your courts Lord is better than a thousand.' (84.10). For me, another time spent like this is on a Monday as I go apart to prayerfully 'be' in God's presence before starting to compose a sermon. Then on Tuesday to put thoughts that come into print. Thus one's prayer becomes of be-ing as well as 'doing' prayer. I'm sure we can all experience this, having a balance of doing and be-ing.

Where this fits into the theme of Jesus' coming again is that we less concern ourselves with thinking of a chronological date and appreciate that timelessness of God's kairos being in God's presence, guided and living in his way. We have to live in the chronos of time, and we can also experience the kairos of God.

- 2) Another word that comes up in the context of Jesus's Second Coming is of *Judgment*, and more specifically the Day of Judgment. Over the history of Christianity this has come to be associated with much foreboding, and of possible fires of hell as one option of the outcome of being judged. Images of what outer darkness might be come to mind. What I believe is helpful in this respect is to consider judgement in terms of *accountability*. Parables of Jesus make this an aspect of kingdom living, that we are accountable for how we live. Put simply we reap what we sow. And we do have to take into account what St Paul describes as a Day of Accountability: 'Each of us will be accountable to God' (Romans 14.12). We express belief in the creed – in 'Christ who will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.' Again I believe it is helpful to regard this in timeless context, in the kairos of our living. We do sin, we do fall short of following in God's way, and we have opportunity to say sorry, and to repent, and hence are judged accordingly. Such happens in chronological time, but it is in the kairos that it counts. We are who we are - our character strengths and weaknesses included. Thus in the mercy and grace of God, we can be forgiven and restored in relationship. That is in the kairos of God. Furthermore in believing in Jesus and who he is, and seeking to live his way, we need have no fear of a Day of Accountability. Judgement occurs, yes we know that, as it happens daily, and yet we can be and are restored through Christian processes.
- 3) *Readiness*. Then how are we to live, in this state of readiness as the scripture counsels? 'Therefore you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.' We may be guided by the early Christians. Remember that the gospels and letters to the churches were written just years after Jesus died and rose again. They were very mindful of Jesus' promise to come again, this time in glory. However time was going by and some were dying. When would he come? St Paul counselled they were to *get on with living*. Thus he wrote to the believers at Corinth, 'My beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' (1 Cor 15.58). To the Thessalonians after writing about the promised coming of the Lord, he wrote: 'Let us encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are now doing.(1 Thess 5.11) The believers were to continue to proclaim the good news, 'so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ' They were to 'stand fast and hold to the traditions that they were taught by word of mouth or by letter.'

As he *concludes* and I conclude - from the 2nd letter Paul prayerfully writes beautiful words on today's theme of hope. May I suggest this can also be as encouragement to us: 'Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.' (2 Thess. 2.16). Amen, so be it.