

Happy New Year!

Happy New Year! Well, not quite! But today marks the beginning of the church's year. In their wisdom our ancestors set out to prepare us to hear once more the wonderful and perhaps shocking truth that God has become fully human while still remaining fully God. He took on skin - and flesh and blood. In every sense - except he never sinned - he was and is like us. Human, through and through. And so, rather than leave it all to Christmas, we hear over about a month, how God prepared the world for the human birth of God-become-man. And because he promised to return one day in his now changed nature, as we hear about his conception and birth and the world's reaction to it, so we also hear of what we call his second coming. And that's because Jesus himself taught us to. We look back to his first coming and forward to his return.

That's where our gospel reading takes us today.

In Matthew's gospel chapter 24 and verses 36-44, the Lord makes 4 points we need to remember in the run up to Christmas.

1. We know Jesus will return, and that this will be the last thing ever to happen.
2. Only God the Father knows when this will happen - Jesus himself doesn't know, let alone us.
3. We know that 'til then life will have its usual ups and downs.
4. Yet, we have to factor in his return and be ready for it.

1. We know Jesus will return, and that this will be the last thing ever to happen.

Verse 36 is the main sentence or verse in this section: *36"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*

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We know Jesus is talking about days of great distress which will include the fall of Jerusalem, but that he means they will happen within the lifetime of the generation listening to him then. ONLY those things will happen - NOT his return. And he underlines all that he says here with a claim to have the highest authority possible:

³⁴ I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Just like the words of God in the Old Testament, Jesus words are the final word. Absolutely true. Absolutely trustworthy.

What is more, it's important to see them like that, because:

2. Only God the Father knows when this will happen - Jesus himself doesn't know, let alone us.

This truth runs through the whole gospel passage:

In verse 42: "you do not know on what day your Lord will come."

In verse 44: "the Son of Man (Jesus' nickname for himself) will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

There has hardly been an area of Jesus teaching more misunderstood than this. Yet the Lord's words are as plain as could be. Wondering when he will return is a waste of energy. Working out when he will return is a waste of brain power. Telling people you've got it worked out is a lie. Jesus speaks very clearly and plainly. The angels don't know. Even he doesn't know. ONLY. ONLY God the Father knows.

Of course we would love to know when he will return.

But why?

Humans are incredibly curious, but Jesus has another answer.

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3. We know that 'til he returns life will have its usual ups and downs.

Jesus says:

³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸

For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.¹

The point?

His return will be completely unexpected. From Noah's time Jesus draws the lesson for us that life will just be going on as normal. People then didn't have a clue what lay ahead. They focussed on the busyness of everyday life. Nothing special, nothing to give a clue about the huge event that was about to hit them. Things in that generation were not better and no worse than in previous generations - at least to the average Joe in the street. So with the return of Jesus. It will be unexpected.

But it will be sooner than expected:

Jesus says:

⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. ²

The point?

You would normally expect if two men went out to harvest two would return.

If two women were grinding flour they would both finish the job. And the next thing would follow.

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But it's as if one went off to lunch early and left the other. Lunch came earlier than expected.

So with the return of Jesus, it will come earlier than expected.

And it will come at a different time than expected.

Jesus says:

⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.³

The owner sees no need to get the locksmith in because he's never been burgled before. But thieves don't work to a timetable. They don't wait 'til they know you're at home with a baseball bat waiting for the first sound of a break-in. They work to their timetable.

So with the return of Jesus.

God works in this as in all things to his timetable.

4. Yet, we have to factor in his return and be ready for it.

⁴² "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."⁴

⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.⁵

We may not know the when of his return, but we certainly are left in no doubt as to what to do about it.

Don't spend time trying to work out when he will return.

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Realise it is coming, but its timing is unexpected.

And be ready for his return.

But what does that look like?

Jesus here, and the Bible more widely, use words like: “watch”, “Be alert”, “be ready”, “prepare”.

So, we don't down tools, walk away from our jobs, stop having fun, stop marrying, or stop watching the cricket or Netflix just because we know Jesus will return one day.

We don't go down the weird track of trying to compute when Jesus will return. No!

Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans chapter 13:

“let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

We just keep living the normal way Christians do. We keep on rejoicing in Jesus our Saviour and working at being like him in all we do. We keep working at single-mindedly serving God, not joining the sexualised culture of our day, nor fighting with one another. We focus on being like the One who will return.

May it be so for each of us.