

THE HOUR THAT NO ONE KNOWS

STAY AWAKE AND BE READY

MATTHEW 24.36-44

Introduction

Many years ago a small group of family members were sitting down to dinner. It was an important and intense occasion for those present. A knock came at the door. I got up from the table, angry believing it was a person who taken to harassing us in such ways.

I opened the door and said angrily, "Go away and don't come back here again." Then I slammed the door. I stood in the hall with mouth wide open and a sinking, sick feeling.

I opened the door again slowly and standing there were my son and youngest daughter who had flown out from the UK to come to this occasion. It was meant to be a surprise. I was in shock and so were they.

Be ready! I was far from ready. Of course, tears and apologies and much else followed.

Jesus says; be ready. Paul says; be ready. What are talking about?

Let's begin at the beginning and see if we can understand what the disciples were asking 24.2-3

It is always good to know what the question is.

It really is all about the Temple. Jesus warns them that not one stone will be left upon another; it will be thrown down.

Then the disciples ask him,

“Tell us when will this be and what will be the sign of your coming at the end of the age?”

The disciples are framing their enquiry in the light of a metaphor that shaped Jewish thinking at the time. They used the metaphor of birth to describe how they saw the new world that God intends to bring forth.

Now we know that the birth of new life is joyous beyond belief but often especially for the mother it can be an upsetting, traumatic and painful time. In Jesus' time there were no epidurals or caesareans for ordinary people.

The birth and its pangs are a way of talking about God's future. We cannot describe such things in detail but we can use pictures like birth, marriage, new growth in spring. God's future is like all these and unlike them as well.

Jesus thought of God's future in two parts. There was first, his place in it; his own calling and destiny. His life and journeying to Jerusalem, the hostility and enmity that dog him and finally his death are part of that future.

The second part of God's future that Jesus spoke of was the fate of the Jerusalem Temple. One of the reasons that Jesus provoked hostility was that he spoke as though he thought that he, rather than the temple, was the centre of God's healing, saving and reconciling work for Israel and the world. He saw that the Temple had come under judgment and was no longer a suitable agent for God's purposes.

Of course, he was resisted in such a view, strongly resisted by the political establishment and put to death over it. I have spoken of this much before throughout the year.

Now you can see why the leaders resisted Jesus' view. Isaiah 2.1-5 tells the reader that God intended to make Jerusalem and the Temple the centre of his birthing of a new world order, an order in which justice and mercy based in God's word and not violence and might would rule.

In other words, God's future would be centred in the Temple where the Presence would rule.

But Jesus says to the rulers of Israel that he is assuming that role. The purpose has not changed, to bring forth a new order of things, but the agent has: It Jesus himself and not the Temple.

So the disciples have asked Jesus a double barreled question; when will this be and how? And what will be the sign and when will the world know that Jesus really is God's messiah, God's King of the new world? Those two questions are the background to this small part of Jesus' answer to them.

Jesus then describes to his disciples the birth-pangs of the new world in the passage that follows the question and they will be long and very painful for many. The he reminds them to be ready in this passage that continues into chapter 25.

And we need to read this passage as Matthew's first readers did; in the light of the events of AD 70 the destruction of Jerusalem and the desecration of the Temple. It was a time of devastation for families and communities.

So this is a passage about how we can be ready for God's future.

Obviously for us the destruction of the temple is a tragedy long in the past. And God's vindication of Jesus as the crucified King comes to fruition in his resurrection and ascension. The Son of Man has

already received the accolades of Him who sits on the throne, the saints and angels.

So where do we fit into this? Well we are still people who meet God's future all the time.

How does God's future meet us?

It is obvious that the events Jesus is speaking about are long in the past. But three questions remain unanswered for us and interpreters down through the ages have used this passage to help us find answers for them. Those questions are something like this:

We say that Jesus rules but that is not obvious and we want to know when will that be made plain to all? When will the royal visitation be?

Then we want to know how God's future meets us every day? After all, we are not left alone, Christ rules in the Spirit. We have a royal visitor all the time.

And then we want to know about how God's future and our future meet in our death?

Now how long do we want to stay in church this morning? Jesus gives us a starting point, a clue that opens up the possibilities for us.

So he reminds us of

Three important things to remember when God's future meets us three enduring warnings

The first thing is nobody knows the timing. God's future has no timetable that we can discern. In verse 34 he gives the disciples a clue in their day that it will all take place within a generation. And it did. The Son of Man ascends to rule and the Temple is gone.

Get this straight; all speculation is useless. Investing life and energy in such is vain. Disciples do not have the time. It was true then, it is true now.

Second, life will go as normal. Human beings will do all the usual things, domestic life will continue, marriage, singing, eating and political life will cause upheaval and stress and death. Its banality can deceive us, lull us into sleep and we forget our calling in the midst of life's demands; a calling to be disciples.

Third, when the time comes, it will divide families, friends, neighbours, and work colleagues. When the Romans poured into Palestine on their mission to destroy Jerusalem they ripped people apart just as happens in modern wars. Discipleship will cost us.

So what next?

Be ready when God's future meets us

Jesus simply makes the point that best way not to miss something is to stay awake. One thing is certain: God's future will meet us in all of the circumstances above. So be ready.

So don't be like the fool who, although he knows the thief is on the way, takes no measures to prevent him ransacking his house.

The following passage in Matthew and the passage from Romans 13.9-14 help us.

In both passages we are given a stark choice. We can be wise or stupid servants. The wise servant gets on with business of doing what his master wants him to do.

Our master has left us things to do, much to do, and most of it is to do with daily business of living the Gospel. So Paul talks about loving the neighbour. We do that in the power of the Risen Lord Jesus. We

put him on and live in him. We live close to him. We don't wander off into the madness of exploitation of others, self-gratification or a totally selfist existence.

Being ready is learning to discern the difference between wisdom and folly in our lives. The wise person keeps short accounts with the living God. Putting on Christ means that you can do little else. The wise person is one for whom prayer, God's Word, God's Spirit and worship guide self-examination, the discerning of our calling and the way we go about our calling.

Discernment in the Bible is described by Paul as discerning the things that differ. The Romans passage gives us an example of such discernment. What we are discerning is the way of Christ's love in the midst of many other options, many of which would be considered foolish in the extreme. They are distractions from love.

The trouble with the word love for us is that it is confused with romance, feeling good, just doing it, and emotional states. In the New Testament love is learned and practised; it requires effort because the example is Jesus. Love is very unromantic; enemies, the 'unlovable', and even neighbours can be difficult and time-consuming in their demands. We speak about 'managing' such people: that is all about control. Loving them is another matter: loving is about letting them be free to be what God wants them to be. Love has to be genuine (12.9); it can never be pretence. To genuinely enter into the situation of another requires courage and a firm resolve. Ethics cannot be reduced to emotions; if we do so we lose all notion of consistent behaviour and genuine empathy.

Conclusion

The royal presence can come among at any time and is among us now. It can come in the forms I mentioned

The royal visit to finally display who really rules the world;

The daily meetings in life with the Risen Christ, and

The moment when God's future and our future meet in death.

Are we ready? Are we awake? What better steps might we take as persons and as a parish to be ready, to be discerning?