

Advent 1 Matthew 24:36-44

As we begin the season of Advent we must once again think about preparedness, getting ready for the things to come. That is not just to speak of Christmas although that is looming over us, instead it is to speak of preparing for the second coming of Christ, for the establishment of God's kingdom here on earth, to speak about those things that we find difficult sometimes to discuss.

Why do we find it so hard to focus on Jesus' promise that he will come again in glory? Is it because it's been a while and it hasn't happened yet? Is it because we don't believe it? Or is it because we don't really understand what this second coming really means? Part of me thinks that for some people it can even be a mixture of all those things that makes them avoid this part of the faith to which they are otherwise fully committed.

But our Gospel reading doesn't allow us the luxury of not engaging with this, it is spelled out quite clearly, the day will come when "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left." Jesus even admits that he has no idea when that will be, it is the prerogative of the father and not something shared with the son.

This is a promise from God, and God's promises are secure and unfailing. Just as he made covenants with the patriarchs and saw them through, so Jesus made this promise with his followers. And in making this promise he refers us back to one of those patriarchs, to Noah, the man of obedience who did what God asked although his neighbours laughed at him for it.

The story of Noah is one of the best known old testament stories, it is full of animals and a rainbow so it lends itself particularly well to being told to children and as such for many of us the story of Noah may have been our first introduction to scripture. But once we get past the cute animals and all the children's songs, the story of Noah is full of fundamental truths about the relationship of humanity and God.

Noah had a relationship with God, just as we have, and in his prayers with the Lord he came to understand a particular role for him, the purpose of his life, and he was given an opportunity to prepare for a situation that was to come. He did not know when it would happen and he didn't have to respond to the call to prepare. Noah could have ignored the warning from God and, like his friends and neighbours, gone along with life content that nothing would happen to him.

But Noah was obedient to God, he recognised God's authority and sovereignty over the earth and he responded to the opportunity to prepare. He built his ark, it was enormous, he was laughed at by everyone who knew, and he couldn't really hide what he was doing, the ark was enormous! But Noah's relationship with God was more important than what other people thought of him. Without warning the time came and God's promise was

fulfilled, the rain came, the ark was filled and Noah, his family and the animals they brought aboard were saved.

For people of faith there is so much more to this story than rainbows and animals. What is important for us is the truths within that story, truths we know from our own experience. The truth of God's longing to form relationships with us just like he did with Noah, to guide and offer wisdom to our flawed humanity. Also the truth of God's faithfulness in promises, of our knowing, with hindsight, that God has been there in our lives and he is steadfast in his love and care for us.

So with all that in mind we have no reason to doubt this promise in today's gospel reading and we have been warned that we have no idea when this will come to pass. We could live like those neighbours of Noah and think this is all a bit far fetched and it won't happen to us, or we can be like Noah, and prepare anyway. He had no more certain knowledge than anyone else that the flood would come, but he had faith and that faith was lived out in obedience.

But it was easy for Noah to prepare for a flood, you might think, he had plans and everything so he could build something tangible to get ready. How do we prepare for the coming of Jesus again? Well it may not require any hardware shopping or boat design, but we do need something of what Noah had, faith, obedience and the time to listen to God and what he asks of us.

If we can do one thing this advent to better prepare for the coming of Jesus it will be to make time to listen to God. How can we know what our role is in bringing about the kingdom if we never have time to hear what the Lord has to say to us? And it is even more important in advent, when the world drags us further away from our routines with extra shopping and extra cooking and extra parties and lots of visiting. It's even harder to prioritise God at this time but that, paradoxically is exactly why we must prioritise God.

When we are too busy, or too tired or too distracted to pray is when we need prayer the most. So perhaps we can challenge ourselves this advent, find some extra time each day to do something to bring us closer to God, whatever works for you, it will be different for each of us, go for a walk, or read scripture or poetry or something else, find a church activity in the week you don't normally attend, an extra service or bible study, or simply set aside time in quiet prayer by yourself. No one is going to check up on us, this is a commitment we make between ourselves and God, no one else needs to know. But find something special this advent to help get ready for the coming of Christ, for you will know neither the day nor the hour!