



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

NOW is the time to wake up

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

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Advent

This is the season of Advent which reminds us of the coming of the Lord – he came and he is to come again. It is a time to prepare for Christmas – no - not in buying presents but considering again the wonder of the incarnation – that God should take on flesh and dwell with mankind.

It is also the season to remind us of the second coming – that the same Christ promised to return in power – and keep us aware of what our hope is and how we should live in the light of it.

The practice of Advent is very old – certainly it was observed in 480AD. As a time of preparation for the second coming, it calls us to reflection and amendment of life. For that reason, its liturgical colour is purple as in Lent the other season of repentance.

Advent looks back to the first coming of the Messiah and it looks forward to the second coming. That is the way of future prophecy – it is often like looking at two or more stacked transparencies. You see through one to the other – details of the two are similar and are described together.

So it is that our Old Testament reading looks forward to the time of the Messiah. But this is seeing beyond the first coming to the Last Days when he comes again. Then there will be a golden era. Nations will come to God and long to follow him. “Nations” are the gentiles – the non-Jews. That includes New Zealanders. At that time, our people remaining will long to know the way of the Lord.

That was my prayer during the prayer vigil we have just held over Friday to Saturday. Turn our hearts towards you, Lord! Or in the words of Psalm 80:3 “Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.”

Will you ask that for yourself? “Turn my heart towards you, Lord.”

His rule will be established on earth from Jerusalem.

We have all heard that passage many times before. When preparing this sermon, I registered the fact that the reason they will not go to war anymore in that age is that the Messiah will judge or rule the peoples so he will settle their disputes.

Just recently, I learnt of a radical mission organisation working in the middle of the Middle Eastern conflict. It is called Love for the Least and their team goes right into ISIS areas to bring relief, to pray, to heal and to preach. They are very brave. On their website there is this account; it sounds like a foretaste of the Messiah judging the people.

A Yazidi friend's family, all twenty seven, were captured by ISIS. It was night and they were locked up, awaiting rape and execution in the morning. That evening our friend went to a Christian pastor and asked the pastor to pray to "his God" for his family.

That night, Jesus came to the father in jail at 2 am in a dream and asked him, "Do you know who I am?" The father responded, "yes, you are *Isa Nuhurani* (Jesus the light)." Then Jesus asked him, "What are you doing here?"

The man said he and his loved ones were arrested by ISIS and were awaiting their fate in the morning.

Jesus replied, "You will all be freed in the morning!" Then Jesus summoned the ISIS fighters to stand before Him in a line. Jesus told them, "I judge you. And I will condemn you. If you don't change from your wicked ways you will burn in hell. Let this family go free in the morning!!"

The father woke up the family at 4am and told them of his dream. Not believing the old man, they told him to go back to sleep. When daylight came at 6am, the family heard the door to their cell open. The ISIS fighters told them all to leave. "You are free to go!"

And it gets more interesting. The son, our friend, had the very same dream that night. The father is now a follower of Jesus and the son, too, is now a Believer and learning how to be a pastor. He is being discipled by other pastors while caring for a Yazidi community in the far north living in an abandoned, unfinished building.¹

As I said, this could be a foretaste of Jesus ruling the nations but the time to which Isaiah refers is we think after Jesus' return in his 1000 year reign on earth.

This week's readings as we start Advent are all directed to the second coming. It is a time when we are encouraged to take stock of our lives and check that we are living our lives in the light of the return of Christ as judge and Lord.

In the gospel reading, we hear Jesus himself speaking of that time. The first thing he said was that then, he did not know when it would come but he knew it would come. Jesus said only Father God knew when the second coming would occur. This, by the way, is an example of kenosis – Jesus laying aside divine attributes in order to become man – Jesus (on earth) did not know all things, but what the Father told him.

Jesus said no one but the Father knows so if anyone says they know when it is going to be – and plenty of people have tried to predict it - they are wrong and you don't need to listen to them. Anyone can say it is getting closer – that is always true.

The whole point of this passage is that no one will know and that people will be taken by surprise.

As an example Jesus refers to the people living in the time of Noah. His point is that they were living their lives, getting married, having children, giving them in marriage, eating and drinking when suddenly judgement fell – and then it was too late! Noah had preached but they had not listened. Only Noah and his family were saved from the flood. It was not that these were sinful activities just that they focused on themselves and their wants with no thought for righteousness or spiritual realities and were caught off guard when judgement came. Jesus said, "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."

Jesus then makes the point twice more that we cannot tell the day of his return or the hour.

The first is to speak of the rapture. The day will come when people are at work and some will be taken away and some left behind. It is either-or – taken or left. The idea of the rapture is perhaps best explained by reference to 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

¹ <http://www.lovefortheleast.org/jesus-speaks-to-isis/>

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.

From our gospel passage viewpoint, the important thing is that people will be about their ordinary tasks when the moment comes.

The second illustration is that a thief does not come at the expected time. If householder knew when a thief was coming he would be ready for him. I remember at time when I was at home sick, lying in bed. The front doorbell rang. I was sick and did not want to get up so I ignored it. Now, my bedroom faced onto the driveway. Next thing I heard the sash windows rattle and saw a figure through the curtain trying the windows. Then he headed for the back door which I knew was unlocked! Suddenly, I was out of bed heading for the door to lock it but too late, I saw the door handle turning. I stepped back out of sight and as the door opened, I said loudly and more firmly than I felt, "I'll thank you to get out of this house." Happily he did!

Jesus warns that when he comes again it will be when he is not expected.

During the prayer vigil, I discovered a book of prayers by Ruth Etchells, called "Just As I Am." Here is her prayer for Advent:

Lord God, as I hear the majestic message of Advent, with its call to prepare for the coming of the Lord Christ, and its reminder of the first and last things between which I live; give me grace to use this time well.

Let me recognise and offer my mortality to the transformation of Christ's coming.

Let me recognise and offer my standing under judgment to the transformation of Christ's passion.

Let me recognise and offer the eventual end of all things to the transformation of Christ the King, enthroned in power in realms beyond the world's ending.

So, Lord, let me in sober and thankful wonder, prepare myself for your Advent.

So we have established that Jesus warns us of a coming Day and says we should live in the awareness of that hour. Paul in the Epistle reading set for today tells us how we should then live.

We are in a long period of waiting and we don't know how long for. The end could come anytime. We do not know the time of the second coming but Paul says the hour has come to be ready! He uses *kairos* the appointed time. We may not know the appointed time for the second coming but THIS is the appointed time to be ready! So wake up!!

Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Salvation has tenses associated with it because it is a process. You may be able to say, "I was saved at some time in the past." You are being saved as the relationship continues and you are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. Our salvation will complete when the Saviour comes and it is finished.

Paul likens the long wait to night time as perhaps a watchman waits for the dawn. Darkness is when Christ is away, the dawn is his return. But darkness is the time for wrong doing. So he says as you wait don't indulge in the misdeeds of darkness.

How will we avoid them? He tells us the same thing in two ways: Put on the armour of light; clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

First change your clothes - put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.

The deeds of darkness are the works of the flesh, sins we are tempted into. Paul lists three groups of sins here - things that belong to the old life, things that characterise some unsaved people especially in the night. They are: intemperance – excessive feasting and drunkenness; sexual misconduct; contention and quarrelling.

Instead, we are exhorted to put on armour of light. Paul to such armour in slightly different ways in three places but he is obviously thinking of the same broad idea in each case. In Ephesians he refers to a breastplate of righteousness, a belt of truth. Truth and righteousness are elsewhere associated with light. These qualities will help protect us against involvement in the deeds of darkness.

Paul puts it another way - put on Lord Jesus Christ. We may already be in Christ as born again believers, but part of our defence is to cover ourselves with Him. Have you noticed the parts of the armour I just mentioned are all characteristics of Jesus? Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. Putting on the armour and putting on Christ are two ways of saying the same thing. We put him on and do not think how to fulfil the desires of the flesh. Don't seek to satisfy them.

I read you before a prayer for Advent written by Ruth Etchells. Hear now the traditional collect for Advent Sunday based on this epistle and if you will say Amen:

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever,