



Sermon

The Hope of Glory

Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

29th November 2020 – Advent Sunday

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Here we are in a new Church year on Advent Sunday. You will remember that Advent means “coming”. Advent is the season when we focus our attention on the promise of Jesus that he is coming again and we remember his first coming as we prepare for Christmas.

The teaching we have been hearing from Jesus over the last several weeks comes to a head in this passage. The disciples had asked him about the end and he told them about the destruction of the temple and events leading up to his own return.

If you struggle with this you are not alone. We all do. Much ink has been spilt considering different interpretations of these words as people have tried to fit them to past or possible future events.

I do not pretend to have a clear simple outline nor can I tell you when Jesus will come again. And if I did tell you when he is going to return, I would expect you to reject it out of hand! Why? Because Jesus tells us very clearly here, in the parallels in Matthew and Luke and in Acts that no one knows the time, even he did not know it, only Father God knows that time.

I remember a conversation with George Curle who wrote a book, *The Times of the Signs*, in which he placed the second coming in (if I remember correctly) 2005. I protested to him that Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour, to which he retorted, “But he didn’t say you can’t know the year or the month.” Well, George was wrong as he was bound to be. And his response was wrong because he did not recognise the rhetorical style of Jesus’ words. Jesus means no one except the Father knows when it will happen.

Some of the events in Jesus’ answer to the disciples have surely already been fulfilled with the destruction of the temple in 70AD, while others are still future. Scholars differ over which events to put in which category.

But today I want to focus on the **Hope** we have in the promise of the Coming of Jesus. Hope is the keyword for this first Sunday in Advent.

Now Biblical hope is different from the common, current use of the word hope. We lazily use it to mean that we wish for something. But that devalues the word, in the same way that awesome has been devalued. Biblical hope is sure expectation. The thing hoped for is good – hope is positive. It is in the future but you are sure that it will happen.

There is an expression I used to puzzle over: “to hope against hope.” Once I realised you could say expect instead of hope it made more sense, to expect against expectations. It is a quote from Romans 4:18 where Paul says Abraham had no natural expectation of having children but because God had promised him many descendants he expected that anyway. So he expected against natural expectations.

It is a strong teaching of all the New Testament that Jesus will come again. This is a hope – it is positive, it is future, it is sure - but it is not yet.

Jesus is very clear in this gospel passage that he will come again in glory and with power. The purpose of his teaching is not to lay out a timeline for us to decode but to encourage his followers through the years as tough times come (especially persecution) that God knows the end from the beginning, he is in charge. It may be tough, very tough, but we need to hold on to the end and the good outcome. Paul refers to this in our Epistle reading, verses 7-9:

... as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

The promise is repeated not once but many times through the Bible. Jesus will come again in glory and power accompanied by angels to judge humanity.

Now we generally don't like the idea of judgement. We shy away from it. Conversely, in the Old Testament they tend to long for it and welcome it as we read in the Isaiah passage today,

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ... Come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!”¹

This seems rather odd. We have far more reason to be confident in facing him in judgement as those who have been saved, redeemed, justified and sanctified. If we have put our faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, we have already passed through judgement. We have admitted our guilt and Jesus has atoned for it so we will not be judged for our sins in the Last Judgement.

There will be a judgement of believers - the judgement of rewards. We who trust Christ will have their works judged for the rewards to be assigned to them. It is a positive judgement not for condemnation but for rewards to be granted.

So we have the hope of seeing our Saviour in glory and power. We have the confidence of salvation because he died for us and rose again.

Then there will be a glorious future state for those who inherit the Kingdom of God. Jesus will say, “Come, O Blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepare for you from the foundation of the world.”²

We will enter a kingdom where “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.” [Revelation 22:3]

This is not some airy-fairy, non-physical state, Isaiah, Peter, James and John all wrote of the new heavens and the new earth.³ Revelation 21:2 tells of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. In that future state, God will dwell with redeemed humanity, they shall be his people and he will be with them. In the new creation, there will be a joining together of heaven and earth and we shall live in the presence of God.

In the new creation, we shall have resurrection bodies even as Jesus had a resurrection body when he rose from the dead. St Paul is emphatic about this in 1 Cor 15. The resurrection of Jesus is called the first fruit of the general resurrection. The first fruit is the very first of a crop and is the promise of more to come. Jesus is the first of many, many brothers and sisters.⁴

¹ Isaiah 64:1,2

² Matthew 25:34

³ Is 65:17, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev 21:1

⁴ Romans 8:29

We are told our resurrection bodies will not grow old or be weak or sick. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. ⁵ We shall see Jesus crowned with glory and honour. ⁶

We are not told all that we might wish to know about that future state, we are told what is necessary for salvation. There are various statements from which we can draw inferences. We must be humble in such inference and not dogmatic since we could easily misinterpret these matters. When we communicate, words relate to common ideas, experiences or perceptions. If I say, "That is blue," you have to know what the colour blue is. If I were talking to someone who was colour blind how would I explain the colour blue? Without the common experience, it is very difficult to communicate an idea. So I suspect some of our difficulty with strange descriptions in prophetic writings is that the prophet has seen something by revelation and is trying to describe it by likening it to ordinary commonly seen earthly things. Without seeing the same thing it is hard for us to imagine. If we saw it, I think we would say, "Oh I see what you mean!"

Nonetheless, Jesus spoke of our feasting with him at the marriage supper in the kingdom. He spoke at the Last Supper of not drinking wine again until he would drink it in the kingdom. Music features strongly in the descriptions in Revelation.

Revelation describes a river running through the new Jerusalem, with the tree of life bearing fruit on its banks. The streets of the city are described as pure gold yet transparent as glass. These could be symbolic but they certainly are intended as very positive and wonderful descriptions. If they are not physical realities in that state they are still wonderful realities.

St Paul wrote in 1 Cor 2:9: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him". The reality will be far greater and far more glorious than we can imagine. Justice will finally be done. There will be no more sin or suffering. The inheritors of the Kingdom will be brought into a glorious existence on the new earth and God will dwell with them. **That is our hope.**

In the gospel reading, Jesus said we cannot predict the time of his return – he is also very clear that we need to remain alert to what he has asked us to do and be ready for his return.

In any organisation there are many responsibilities which need to be done so the organisation as a whole can function well. No employer wants to set staff to work on some tasks and return to find they are not attending to those things. There is a story that Saint Francis was cultivating a row of beans in the garden when a pilgrim approached and asked, "What would you be doing now if you knew this was the last day of your earthly life?" Saint Francis smiled and replied: "I would keep on hoeing." In the story, Francis knew he was doing what he should be doing.

Jesus tells the parable of the householder who goes away leaving his servants responsibilities. They don't know when he might come home but he would expect them to be responsible when he did. Jesus in his example tells us to keep watch and naming the four watches of the night (evening, midnight, cock crow and dawn). He urged his followers, he specifically says it to everyone: **Watch!**

Bishop Peter of Christchurch asks, "How might you live as you watch?' He answers,

"We are to be faithful, repentant and doing his business.

- "Today, am I faithful to Jesus?"
- "Today, have I confessed and repented of all sin?"
- "Today, am I going about my master's business?"

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⁵ Rev 21:4

⁶ Heb 2:9