

Be prepared!

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Advent Sunday, 2nd December 2007, by Rev'd Pauline Main, based on Matthew 24: 36-44 and Isaiah 2:1-5.

Matthew 24: 36-44

³⁶ "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,

to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Sermon

If you'd like a title for the sermon today, perhaps it's *Be prepared!*

Be prepared!

That's the motto of the Scouts and Guides.

"Be prepared for what?" someone once asked Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting,
"Why, for any old thing." said Baden-Powell.

Our readings warn us to be prepared, not for "any old thing", but for the coming of God.

Isaiah – vision – picture of God's coming – all nations acknowledging and worshipping Israel's God

Isaiah's vision of God's coming is a hopeful one.

He sees a time when all the nations are drawn to the Temple to hear God's words and move into a time of peace, when their swords will be beaten into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and it will be God who will arbitrate between the nations.

Jerusalem – Zion - was, in Jewish thinking, the place where heaven and earth meet - the Temple mount, the throne of God, stretches up to heaven.

To the people of Israel, the city of Jerusalem and its Temple were symbols of power and importance. They represented the nation's special identity as people chosen by God, and reassured them that God was present with them. When Jews pictured God's final victory over their enemies, they often imagined a scene where people of every nation came flooding up to the Temple. The whole world would recognise Israel's importance and come to worship Israel's God. Once this happened, the whole world would keep the Jewish Law. With God as judge over all, the new age of peace and justice for which Israel had waited so long would be finally, and permanently, established.

Here is Isaiah's version of that vision.

Isaiah's words are not predicting a precise historic event, rather they are an affirmation that history has a goal, which it will reach because of the work of God.

There is a **challenge** in Isaiah's words– an invitation to Israel itself – to walk in God's ways, and in his light.

"O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!"

Matthew - warning and judgment

Matthew's picture of God's coming has more of a note of warning and judgment. Some will be taken up to heaven and some left behind.

Early Christians, like Jesus himself, expected world to end at any moment. By the time Matthew's gospel is written it had not happened.

So - how were Christians to live in these "end times"?

Matthew stresses they should stay alert, watchful, because no one knows when the time will be.

"... about that day and hour no one knows ..." [Matthew 24:36] Jesus had told his followers.... not even Jesus himself.

Be prepared – when the day comes there will be no more time, is the message.

Jesus' words, with all their urgency, are followed in Matthew's gospel by three parables about what my biblical commentary described as "*faithful waiting*" -

- a slave put in charge of the household whilst his master is away – "Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives." [Matthew 24:46]
- the 10 bridesmaids ("wise and foolish virgins") – they had to wait a long time for the bridegroom, and five were ready and five were not [Matthew 25:1-13]
- the parable of the talents – servants entrusted with large amounts of money by their master when he is away. How do they use it? [Matthew 25:14-30]

Faithful waiting – a good description.

Faithful waiting - more than being prepared

There is more to it than "being prepared".

For there seem to be three distinct aspects of this faithful waiting –

- Being ready/prepared – having oil in the lamp, like the wise bridesmaids
- Being alert/awake – ready to welcome the bridegroom when he comes. It is easy to be discouraged when there is delay – we don't like waiting, especially in this impatient age. But Jesus says – be alert.
- Carrying on with life - doing the things we should be doing, like the faithful slave waiting for his master's return; like the servants who make good use of the money they are given.

And there is an aspect of **judgment** – once the day comes, it will be too late to prepare. Only those who are ready, those who have waited faithfully, will be accepted. The judgment comes from ourselves – like the sheep and goats – did you follow my teaching, my ways, asks Jesus [Matthew 25:31-46].

God seems to keep his people waiting –
Waiting in captivity in Egypt
Waiting to enter the promised land
Waiting in exile
Waiting for the messiah.
Waiting for the Kingdom

There's a pattern here. Perhaps it is to develop faithful waiting – a trust and dependence on God.

Faithful waiting – what does it mean for us?

So what are the implications for us in this idea of “faithful waiting”?
What are we waiting for?

2000 years have passed since Christ's death and resurrection, so unlike the first Christians, we are not waiting for the imminent end of the world.

Or are we?

Being alert

I kept thinking of an issue we've looked at before - climate change and global warming. They don't affect us directly as yet. But there are warnings. The recent tragedy (flooding) in Bangladesh is horrifying. But it is also a warning ... which should puncture our complacency.

Have you seen the film *The day after tomorrow*? It is a science fiction film about climate change. The predictions are for disaster, but years in the future. In the film, one scientist is saying that his predictions are much nearer. The politicians won't listen. Then – disasters begin to happen – tornados in places which don't have them; huge drops in temperature causing plane accidents ... a new ice age ...

It's imagination – a different vision from Isaiah's, but one which again perhaps we need to listen to. We don't know the day nor the hour ...and we need to take action now, to be alert – and to live faithfully so that our world is protected.

Faithful waiting – our experience

Then, something much more parochial - our own vision of a refurbished church open to the community ...

I said God seems to make people wait. It's certainly been true in that case, and, like the people of Israel at certain times, we are not sure why.

But we are called to faithful waiting, Called to ***be prepared*** – that's the process we are going through (again) at the moment, as we talk to people in the community, prepare our case for Synod, as we think about fundraising. So that if the call comes from God to go ahead – ***we are ready***.

Meanwhile – we are called to ***continue in faithful discipleship***, day by day in the life of our church.

I read somewhere that the Advent journey is less about arriving than how we journey. That's true, I feel, for the whole of our journey of faith. We are called to be faithful – that's why it's faith.

There is something in all of this about having a vision for the future whilst continuing faithfully in the present.

That's what we have for our church, but it's also the kind of language we use about the Kingdom of God – now and not yet.

We try to work with God to build the Kingdom on earth ... showing God's love through serving others, but also meeting Christ in one another ... "as you did it for the least of these ... you did it for me" [*Matthew 25:40*]. That's the now, that's the continuing faithfully in the present.

But we do also have a vision - like Isaiah – of a time (perhaps the wrong word) , of a place outside time, where God's love and justice prevail.

And with the people of Israel, we are challenged

“O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!”