

Romans 13:11-14

11 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Matthew 24:36-44

36 “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. 42 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Keep watch

Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

At Advent we nearly always think about the second coming of Jesus. I’ve never really got used to that, it’s always seemed a bit out of place, but in fact it reminds us that the work of the first coming isn’t complete. This passage in Matthew has forced me to think about it a bit more and try for a clearer understanding of what’s always been a confusing and often misused text. Jesus’ words here are a reply to the disciples’ question in verse 3: “*what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*”

Actually, not to disappoint you, but he doesn’t really give them, or us, much to go on. In fact he says that we will get no warning whatsoever! To start with verse 36, this is the single sentence that does away with any idea that the end of the world can be foretold. *About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* There’s not been much mention of it recently but over the years various cults and even christian groups have attempted to predict Jesus’s return, often down to the exact year, month, day and hour.

Nostradamus still attracts regular attention from the tabloid press but his prophecies are so vague that they could relate to pretty much anything.

Martin Luther, no less, expected it to happen in 1530 so he was a little bit off! The actual point of prophecy is not prediction of what might happen and when, it's either to encourage or to warn us, so our preaching, as Jesus's did, needs to contain a prophetic element. I'll just highlight this one phrase:

No one knows but the Father. How much more straightforward could it be? You would think that people who profess to follow Jesus would take notice of what he said on the subject, but apparently not.

This all gives weight to the idea that Jesus was fully human – he didn't know everything. It's interesting that some early bible manuscripts omitted the phrase '*nor the son*' because people clearly struggled with the idea that Jesus was not all knowing. We absolutely do believe in his divinity, but it makes sense that being a real physical human being limited his powers.

Jesus is really only preoccupied with one idea here, which is that whatever happens, we won't be expecting his return. He compares it to the days of Noah. But how is Noah relevant?

Well, in the account of the flood, life went on completely as normal and no one was prepared for what would happen. *In the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.* Blissfully unconcerned. And this is the basis for a warning: keep watch, or as it's sometimes translated, stay awake.

Of course this can apply to most people in most periods of history. To most generations, the world seems in a bad way and heading for disaster, and we're no different in 2022. There's another economic meltdown, a dangerous war which could draw NATO into a bigger conflict, and most of all a climate crisis which is causing worldwide fires, flooding and mass migration. And yet it seems that political leaders, rather than dealing with all this, are more interested in power, and their own bank balances. I wrote some of this sitting in Bluewater where the Christmas credit spree *somehow* continues as normal. And we're watching a world cup which was literally bought by a country which had no football stadiums! The more you think about it the more you wonder *where else but the bible* can we find a reason for hope?

And yet the gospel message has been rejected, particularly in the West, where even some of the churches seem to struggle with the idea that we should actually *live* lives of integrity and truth rather than just talking about it, or assuming that our church leaders will do all that stuff on our behalf. We can't afford to be complacent. Jesus here uses the image of someone distressed about being burgled at night and wishing they'd stayed up and kept watch. And Paul says this in Romans 13:11 *The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.* We find that since the first days of the church this has been the message – it could happen at any time, so you need to keep awake. We need to keep a short account with God – to confess our wrongdoing quickly, to pray regularly, and not to let our relationship with Him slide. As the old joke goes, Jesus is coming back, look busy! But you might make that get on your knees. No one knows what will happen next year, or even next week. Then there are these two strange verses. *That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.*
40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.

41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

There have been plenty of theories about what this means, but I think it's the idea that we're all defined by our response to Jesus. Some will stand firm in their faith, others will be swept away because they've put down no roots in what is true and good.

So two things are sure:

1. We have no clue whatsoever when Jesus will return
2. Absolutely no one anywhere will be in any doubt when he does.

That's it really, clearer than I expected.

I'll finish with this from Michael Green's commentary, who says it better than I could:

History is going somewhere.

It is not meaningless.

It is not random.

It is not eternal.

There will be a real end just as there was a real beginning.

And at the end we shall find none other than Jesus Christ.

Amen.