

Stay alert!

In the magnificence of Salisbury Cathedral of England I discovered a quiet little side chapel that contains



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the martyrs' candle. It is a place where you can meditate on the lives of all those who have been killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. At the altar there is a large candle, but instead of a glass cylinder shielding it there is a spiral of barbed wire to which are attached various symbols of violence, warfare and suffering.

Matthew wrote his gospel 40+ years after Jesus had promised to return in victory. The church had already suffered persecution. In fact, some of what Matthew records refers to the tragic events of their day as well as suffering yet to come. But Jesus did not lay out a timetable; instead, he gives us an amazing promise that in God's purpose and time, the Savior will return to announce "It is finished" for eternity. But no one knows that day and hour except the Father. Any notion of counting the ages, identifying the characters and events or figuring out some secret code hidden in the texts is folly. Is anyone smarter than God?

So we are in the same place where Israel was when Jesus came the first time. Israel had their books of law, prophets, stories of the kings and tragedy and the promise of the coming Messiah. Their challenge was to believe God's promises and live as God's people until Messiah came. But they failed over and over. They ignored God's design for living, saw themselves more as privileged than blessed with grace and reshaped God to fit their preferences. No wonder when Jesus appeared they did not recognize him! Considering what Jesus says about his return and the dramatic imagery of Revelation, when Christ comes the second time there will be no confusion or doubt.

Getting ready is the hard part because we become weary and

impatient. The early church believed Jesus was coming back in their day. New Testament writings continue to serve their original function from 2,000 years ago to encourage and guide God's people to be ready each day and live a testimony in the meantime.

Matthew 24-25 records Jesus' words to his disciples before the cross. As disciples of Jesus he reminds us that when he comes again the world will be as it was before Noah and the great flood: "people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage...they didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The Human One will be like that" (Matthew 24:39). Curiously, in this passage there is no threat of judgment or punishment on the evil, but the clear idea that everyone will be surprised. This is not a horror story of those who will be left behind, but an admonition for all God's people, whether they are working in the fields or mills, to be ready (vv. 40-41)!

Even the simple words are significant beyond our usual thinking. We read this passage with the idea it is better to be "taken" than "left behind." The Greek word for "taken" can mean "taken as a prisoner" and "left behind" may be translated "forgiven or left alone." Do Matthew's words imply the one taken is guilty and the one left behind is forgiven? There is always a risk in our reading Scripture through our preferences. This text is not who will be accepted or rejected by God. It is about being ready and expectant no matter when that glorious day comes.

Jesus says: "Stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming" (v. 42). We are reminded that later, before Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, he urged his disciples to watch and pray (Matthew 26:40-41). Jesus knew what was coming. His disciples were caught totally unprepared when Judas and the soldiers appeared to arrest Jesus and pandemonium ensued. We are living in such a time. We do not know the day or hour of Jesus second advent, so we must be praying and living as the

Formations

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Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44

people who serve God faithfully.

Jesus, who often used strange stories and unusual circumstances to make his point, refers to his coming as unpredictable as a thief breaking into your home in the middle of the night. Obviously Jesus is not a thief. This is a matter of unpredictable timing. If you know a thief is coming, would you not be prepared? This illustration first used in that discourse referred to the people of Noah's day who were not prepared for the flood.

Jesus says these things because the cross was not far off. He speaks of events that will unfold in their lifetime and ours. Like those first disciples, we must get ready and be alert. Our calling is to embody the teachings of Jesus and share the transforming grace of God. We read about the violence, injustice and poverty of the first century and so often fail to recognize the same conditions in our day.

As we begin this advent season, with all our Christmas traditions and special church events, may we open our eyes and hearts to those around us who need to know Jesus has already come once as God's tangible love. We must not fail to help the poor, suffering and forgotten souls we see every day.

After his resurrection Jesus ascended into heaven, but he continues to be with us and among us in the person of the Holy Spirit. What will you do this advent to help someone experience our Savior's love? How will you find time among all the holiday preparations and events to show someone the real reason we celebrate? Christ could come again this Christmas, or next year, or a hundred years from now. So what will you do to get ready...how will you live...who will you tell?

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