

Advent Sunday 2021

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All Saints' Chilton and St Matthew's Harwell

Luke 21:25-36 (and Jeremiah 33:14-16)

A. Introduction

Today we enter the season of Advent. Many of us have made or will shortly be making plans for this coming Christmas.

Yesterday in both of our churches we have been making Christmas decorations to put on the trees! We plan for things that we anticipate are going to happen. But if when I moved to Harwell 10 years ago I paid close attention to an ancient **Maya** prediction doing the rounds (fanned somewhat, I suspect, by the marketing machine behind the **movie**), I would have only been planning to mark one Christmas, as it was anticipated that on December 21st 2012 the world was going to end.

There are – and always have been – a whole host of predictions like this that attract attention and get taken seriously by many people. According to American Pastor **Harold Camping** May 21st 2011 should have been the end of the world, according to calculations based on his reading of the Bible. The apocalypse clearly didn't occur then, and Camping and his followers were widely mocked for being on the loony fringe of religion and for swallowing such obvious rot.

You may or may not know, however, that it is fact pretty mainstream science to believe that one day the world will end. There are of course lots of competing theories and so you can take your pick from the following: **nuclear annihilation**, global pandemic (and of course this option seems more feasible to us living in the time we do now), climate change and rising sea levels, supervolcanoes or megatsunamis, **meteorite impact**, or Planet Earth being boiled to death by changes in the sun over the next couple of billion years.

But even if we don't think in planetary or cosmic terms, or we can't cope with the thought of thousands, millions and even billions of years, none of us can avoid the more immediate prospect of the end of our **own lives**. In the last few weeks we have taken a number of funerals in Harwell and Chilton, with – it has to be said – many more anticipated. Death is the ultimate statistic – all of us, whatever our beliefs, will, sooner or later, be face to face with the prospect of eternity. We don't know when, we don't know how, but we do know that it will happen one day.

And that is the message of this sermon – about **knowing and not knowing**. Verses 25-31 and the parable of the Fig Tree speak of what we do know, and verses 32-37 speak of what we don't. And because I'm feeling a bit contrary **[slide click]** this morning, we'll take them in the opposite order and conclude with a few brief thoughts about what we should do about it. But before that, a few words about **Advent**.

B. Advent and the Coming of the Messiah

For many people, Advent is basically the run-up to Christmas when we dust off the **decorations**, start planning for and performing programmes of carol services and nativity plays, polish the brass and drag trees and lights up church towers. **Well done and a big thank you to all those involved with this weekend's great efforts – the churches are looking splendid. Christmas is coming!** But Advent is not just about preparing to celebrate the First Coming of Christ. During Advent, Christians also think about the *Second* Coming of Christ, a decisive event that will mark the end of this present age; an event even more dramatic and decisive than those 'end of the world' options that I listed earlier.

The OT is full of prophecies about the end times, and how the Messiah, God's appointed King, will come to bring God's rule, his Kingdom, to earth, vanquishing his enemies and rescuing his people. A couple of those **OT prophecies** are referred to by Jesus in our reading. Verse 25 is an allusion to Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4. Verse 27 alludes to Daniel 7:13-14. And it is clear that Jesus is applying those Messianic prophecies to himself.

It is the Christian belief that Jesus is that Messiah. **Christ** is the Greek version of the Hebrew word Messiah. But the truth of the matter was that the coming of Jesus 2000 years ago, though associated with dramatic and miraculous things, did not fulfil the glorious, decisive OT vision.

Jesus makes it clear that whilst those particular prophecies do apply to him, they refer not to his first, but to his second coming.

It's important to point out that the Second Coming of Christ no fringe belief, the result of the fevered imaging of a few religious **nutters** or a minority view confined to a few obscure texts. But no. It has more than 250 clear NT references, is mentioned by all the NT authors, and features prominently in the historic Christian Creeds. Belief in the Second Coming of Christ is orthodox, mainstream Christianity.

It is fascinating, then, that the idea that Messiah should come more than once had probably not occurred to the OT prophets. But that is because of their limited perspective – they could only know what had been revealed to them. This brings us to verse 32-37 – **what we don't know.**

C. We *don't* know the 'when' (v32-37)

It turns out that the OT prophets, though seeing correctly the important truths about the Messiah were generally unable to discern their timing – that was not what God has given them to know.

[We could think of this prophetic perspective as being a bit like these **optical illusions (x5). You can see clearly the different objects or people, but it's not always clear how they relate to one another.]**

It was rather like the experience you can sometimes have when looking out on a **mountain range**. You can see the peaks before you, some glistening with snow or shrouded with clouds, but it can be very difficult – even impossible – to work out how near or far away each of them were. The insight of the OT prophets turned out to be rather like that. It is as if, reaching the nearest mountains, you realise that what appeared to be mountain peaks grouped tightly together are in fact many, many miles apart.

The prophets spoke of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem, born of a virgin, and suffering an ignominious death, and they also spoke of glorious deliverance, of the dead being raised, and creation itself being renewed. That was the totality of the mountain range in view – that was the clear vision, the promised future. But those things, as it turned out, were to be separated by many centuries.

And it was not just the prophets of old that were ignorant about the timing. It continued into the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and into our time too. As we read in the equivalent passages in **Matthew and Mark**, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Even reference to in verse 32 'this generation' not passing away 'until all these things have happened' doesn't help, as the term could be referring to the whole human race. We have to be agnostic on the question of 'when'. None of us, contemporary Pastors, or ancient Mayans, are able to work out

the timing of the Lord's return, and are wasting our time if we try to do so.

D. We do know the 'what' (v25-31)

So we don't know the timing of Christ's Second Coming. But whilst we may not know the 'when', **we certainly know the 'what'**.

Luke 21 is a fascinating chapter which, like the prophetic perspective, puts together events centuries apart. So again, we can see the different parts – the mountain peaks – but it can be difficult to see how they relate to one another. Jesus teaches about his Second Coming in the same breath as speaking about the time around **AD70** when the Roman armies ravaged Palestine and emperors were fighting for the throne. Jesus often spoke of one thing to illustrate another, using everyday, physical things to teach about unseen spiritual realities. In putting the events around AD70 and the Second Coming together, we have a helpful picture of what both are about. And we learn that both are end-time scenarios, both are about the judgement of those opposed to God and the preservation of God's people.

It is a bit like setting up a **projector** to display a picture or message. You can put a piece of paper just in front of it and see the image there, or you can allow the light beams to play onto the large screen much further back.

The events around AD70 and the Second Coming are two manifestations of God's one activity like images projected onto a near screen and a far one, the near screen of first century middle eastern history, and the ultimate screen of eternity, the former prefiguring the latter. The judgement of those opposed to God and the preservation of God's people is what both are about, the first in a limited, historical way, the second, ushered in by Christ's Return, the ultimate.

We find ourselves in the valley between those two peaks of Christ's First and Second Comings. We are in the overlap of the ages. As I mentioned earlier, the OT prophets generally thought in terms of the **present age** and the age to come, separated by the coming of the Messiah. We understand that there are two comings, and that we live in the overlap of the ages **[slide click]**

Perhaps it is a bit like living in the time between **D-Day** and VE-Day. D-day was that decisive time on 6 June 1944 when the successful Normandy landings determined the outcome of World War II. But the fighting had to continue until VE-Day on 8 May 1945. It was not until then that the armed forces of Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered, 'Victory in Europe' declared and hostilities finally ceased.

We are in the age between the spiritual equivalents of D-day and VE-Day. On the **Cross**, Christ won the battle against the dark powers, paying the price for our sin and overcoming death. On Good Friday, the Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom, signalling the end of the old order, and this was confirmed with the destruction of the whole Temple in AD70.

But things will only be brought to completion with the Return of Christ, the Second Coming, when Christ's victory will at last be experienced by all, and the new age of peace will be fully realised. The work of Christ in his second advent is to implement the conquest and victory won decisively in his first. It will bring in the new creation when wrongs are righted, humanity is judged, and death and suffering finally vanquished.

So whilst we may not know the 'when', we can be sure of the 'what'. From the mouth of Jesus, whose words, we are told in verse 33, "will never pass away", we do know that Jesus *will* come again to bring judgement and salvation.

E. What we should do about it

But **what should we do** in the meantime? What is our role?

Very briefly to end, and in a word: alertness.

Many of you will have dogs. One of the endearing things that **dogs** sometimes do is eagerly anticipate the return of their master or mistress by sitting or standing at the window, stock still but alert, eyes wide open, sometimes almost seeming to hold their breath until the Advent of the expected one – and then of course they charge around like a mad thing, yapping and wagging, to welcome the traveller in.

That is the sort of waiting that Jesus expects of his disciples. No passive, sleepy biding of time, but an alert, eager readiness to respond at a moment to the call of the Master. It means avoiding unworthy thoughts or behaviours, and things that distract us from the work the Lord for us to do, but instead to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. We are to be at the **traffic lights** slipping the clutch, ready for the off. No needing to be roused from a daydream or snooze by the honking of the impatient driver behind.

‘Be on guard, be alert, keep watch,’ Jesus tells us. Let’s not take our eyes off the ball. We may not know the time or day of the Lord’s return, but we know that it will happen. So let’s live in the light of that, **encouraging** one another, all the more as we see the Day approaching (cf Heb 10:25).