

Mark 13 v 24 – 37

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁴ 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁸ 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

REFLECTIONS ON THE COLLECT FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (November 29th 2020)

(with thanks to Rev Peter Wainwright who had offered to preach at the West Wycombe Benefice service today had the service not been cancelled)

Advent begins today. In the 'Book of Common Prayer' (published in 1662) there is a footnote after the Collect for today which says: "This collect is to be repeated every day, with the other collects in Advent, until Christmas Eve". In the 'Common Worship' book (published in 2000) there is a footnote which says: "This collect may be used as the Post Communion Prayer on any day until Christmas Eve." So, what this collect has to say is considered to be important. This is how it goes in CW (just slightly amended from the BCP):

"Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever".

One of the points that the collect makes is what a contrast there will be between the first and second comings of our Saviour. His first coming was amazingly 'low-key'. Only a few

noticed his birth in Bethlehem. For the first 30 years of his life Jesus was virtually unknown beyond the area of Nazareth. When he did begin to preach powerfully and do miracles it only lasted three years before he was crucified. He did not write any books or even have a portrait painted etc. etc. Such 'great humility' on the part of the Son of God! The writers of the New Testament were each convinced that Jesus would return to earth one day, and this time he would come 'in his glorious majesty'. To give but one example, Mark quotes Jesus in Chapter 13 v 24 -26: *"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory"*. If Jesus was right about this prediction, then obviously everyone living on earth on that day will know that something shattering is happening. The sun, moon and stars will change their appearance and trajectory. And as the people of the world, in panic, look up they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds'.

On that day will it make any difference to every person as to whether or not during their lifetime they have put their trust in what Jesus said and did during his first coming? Well, the New Testament writers believed that it will. For example, the Apostle Paul was convinced that: *¹⁴"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words"* (1 Thessalonians 4 v 14 - 18).

Now, many people living today, who read passages like this in the New Testament, may find a second coming is very difficult to envisage. It is so different from what we have both experienced in life so far, and also different from the world views with which they have been brought up. All we can say to that is - can Jesus and the early church be trusted -did they really hear the truth from God? It is a decision each individual will make -one way or the other. If this is any help to you in so deciding, would you agree that Jesus got it spot on about how his ministry during his first coming would end? For example, in Mark 10 v 33f Jesus said to his disciples: *'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'* If Jesus was right about that, could he also be right about what will happen at his second coming? Admittedly, it requires a bigger step of faith on our part to believe in the second coming as his prediction about his imminent execution was very much 'on the cards'. Yet his prediction of his rising again involved events beyond human experience. The predictions of the second coming events are of mix of the supernatural and a suspension of the laws of nature.

Was it any easier for those Christians who, around 1750, began to sing with conviction a hymn newly composed by Charles Wesley, than it is for us with our different understanding of science? Can we still sing?

1. Lo, he comes with clouds descending,
once for favoured sinners slain;
thousand thousand saints attending
swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
God appears on earth to reign.
2. Every eye shall now behold him
robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at naught and sold him,
pierced and nailed him to the tree,
deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
shall the true Messiah see.

Jesus used an illustration to suggest to his followers what should be their appropriate attitude about the second coming. In today's Gospel reading we find: *Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.* ³⁴*It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.* ³⁵*Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,* ³⁶*or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.* ³⁷*And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.* (Mark 13 v 33 - 37). Or to put it another way - keep believing in and expecting a second coming. Keep on praying the Collect for Advent with faith.

For nearly 2000 years Christians have been waiting for Jesus to return. In periods of history and in countries where persecution of Christians is intense the cry at the very end of the Bible becomes more urgent and heartfelt; namely: "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' **Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!**"

The Charles Wesley Advent hymn has, as its last verse:

4. Yea, Amen, let all adore thee,
high on thine eternal throne;
Saviour, take the power and glory,
claim the kingdom for thine own:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
Thou shalt reign and thou alone.
AMEN

Rev Peter Wainwright