

Matthew 24:36-44: *Because we do not know the day or time when Christ will come, Jesus encourages the believers to be ready at all times.*

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Matthew's Gospel was written some time after the destruction of the temple in AD 70, primarily for Jewish Christians. Judaism could no longer be a temple-centred, sacrificially enacted religion - it had to find a new form. But it did not find that shape through the newly established and developing vision of the Kingdom of God articulated by Jesus. We can see tonal changes in the gospel itself: the narrative opens with a great theology of *inclusion*, with outsiders, the questionable and the downright scandalous as key figures in the genealogy of Jesus - then progressing towards one in which the leitmotif becomes one of *exclusivity*. Similarly the warm, expansive and generous feel contained in the Gospel's first discourse (the 'Sermon on the Mount') stands in stark contrast to its final discourse, from which today's passage comes, with its woes, and warnings of apocalyptic judgement and destruction. The narrowing of the gospel's emotional key from generosity to condemnation, and the changing narrative dynamic from openness to exclusion are a stark example of what can happen when we let the hurt, anger or frustration of a situation overpower the love, compassion, and hopefulness which are the hallmarks of the life of the Kingdom. Hospitality changes into hostility; generosity is replaced by judgment and the Other becomes an enemy to be resisted rather than a guest to be welcomed. The author may be expressing his own disappointed hopes, and his frustration and anger, that something which had never been intended as an alternative to Judaism, or to exclude its adherents, had been forced into a position of conflict with it. (Pat Bennet)

READINGS COCU1A

The first Sunday of Advent always leads us to reflect on Christ's Second Coming, which is both problematic and exciting. The problem lies in how we deal with the issue of the Second Coming - especially with the ongoing tendency to try and predict times and dates, and with the possibility that it creates a "pie-in-the-sky" theology for our people. The readings offer us another possibility, though - and this is where the excitement lies. In every reading, the promise of Christ's coming is related back to how we live now - which is as it should be. Isaiah and Paul both invite us into a life lived in God's light - a life of peace, justice and morality. The Psalmist encourages us to pray for peace, and to continue to gather for worship where God's presence and 'judgment' are encountered. Finally, Jesus, encourages us to live in 'readiness' - always aware that Christ's coming is immanent, and avoiding the temptation (unlike those in Noah's day) of growing absorbed in self-interest and personal pleasure (what Paul refers to as 'wild parties').

At its heart, the readings are about hope, and living up to a higher standard. If this world is all we have, we can "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die". But, if we truly have hope in Christ, in the coming of life, and of the day when God's reign is the norm, not the exception, in our world, we must live according to this hope now. We must live as people who believe enough in God's coming reign that we will begin to practice its values and principles now. This means we commit ourselves to integrity, justice and peace, and invite others into this way of life.. This means we cannot accept things as they are just because "it's just the way it is". Rather, we commit ourselves to working to create the world of which we dream. This means we live in peace, so far as we can, with all people. We hold ourselves to the highest standards of ethics and morality. We embrace a life of gentle modesty, not in the limited sense in which that word is usually used (of dressing to cover up our bodies out of a fear of our sexuality) but in the sense that we reject ostentatious displays of wealth, wild and excessive self-pleasuring events and exercises, and over-the-top attention-seeking ploys. We seek to demonstrate the kind of life that enriches the world and all creatures who live in it. If we really lived our faith in the coming of Christ, we would seek to express hope in all our interactions, we would invite others into a hope-filled way of living, and we would live the kind of life that demonstrates what we believe the world will one day be.

(John van de Laar, *Sacredise*)

(Commentaries on this page by Rev Ruth Harvey, Church of Scotland)

Psalm 122: *A song of celebration for Jerusalem, the place of worship, the place where God's people are taught and led by God, and a place for which the Psalmist prays prosperity and peace.*

I was glad when they said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem - built as a city that is bound firmly together.

**To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.**

For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: **“May they prosper who love you.**

Peace be within your walls, **and security within your towers.”**

For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, **“Peace be within you.”**

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, **I will seek your good.**

There is a two-fold movement in this Psalm:

1. The people approach Jerusalem and their God (vv 1-4)

They are 'glad' as they arrive in the city, the place of peace, the Jeru-Shalom.

Now they have actually arrived and their 'feet have been standing' on this holy soil. Forever they will have a reference point, a story to tell, an actual physical experience to relate. Seeking peace is not just a notional, or a spiritual, but a physical path. They can have confidence in this city, 'bound firmly together', and binding all who enter, who seek peace – all the tribes may come together in the unity which we now know is the unity of which Jesus speaks (John 14:21). The peace, or 'shalom' which Jerusalem represents is an all-encompassing wellbeing. It is a common home where all needs are met: 1) a sitting court of law; 2) a market for sale and purchase of goods; 3) a place of social interaction and fun and 4) a place of worship.

“This 'four-square' exhibition of 'peace' had found its source of power in the peace of God.” *(The Daily Study Bible: Psalms Volume II, John Gibson (ed)).*

2. The people hear and respond (vv 5-9)

The pilgrims respond to the call to prayer from the priest to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem!' This is a call to join in with the collective work for peace – grounded in our feet, in our presence, in our actions, and rooted in God's love. This is a physical, communal place for justice and peace to be practised, for 'the sake of my relatives and friends' – for 'the (common) good' of all.

Isaiah 2:1-5: *A prophecy of the days when all people will seek to learn God's ways, and God will teach them justice and peace; and an invitation to walk in God's light.*

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

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. 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. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

These prophetic words offer reassurance to the people of Israel that their project is not in vain. Prior and succeeding chapters of Isaiah point to the murder, rebellion, injustice, and corruption of the people of Israel. This chapter offers a promise of salvation that if they focus on the shared common goal of peace, if they set their sights on the highest peak visible to all – God's peace – then great things will come. By focussing on the real needs of the people who are hungry, tired, lacking in energy, losing faith, we can find hope in the promise of goodness beyond despair.

Romans 13:11-14: *Believing in the soon coming of God's day of salvation, Paul encourages the believers to live lives of morality, peace and modesty.*

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul wasn't just concerned with the shortness of time – he was conveying an urgency about the second coming which was 'at hand'. We may not live with that urgency, yet Advent points us to an urgent expectancy for the arrival of our saviour – a 'second coming'. Human time is short. We are called to live each day as if it were our last. 'You know what time it is' – do we live by human time (kronos) or by God's time (Kairos).