

Get the House Ready

Matthew 24:36-44 and Isaiah 2:1-5

The Smell of Christmas

I love the first Sunday of Advent,
Because it is the first Sunday of getting ready for Christmas
And I love Christmas
And I love the getting ready for it.

Sometimes Christians can go all scrooge,
And say you should only put the Christmas tree up on Christmas Eve
Or the start of December
But here we are, November, and we are getting ready for Christmas
Quite right.

When it comes to Christmas, and anticipation
It's always the smells I think of first
The smell of the tree
The smell of mulled wine
Nutmeg and Sage
And those shavings of cinnamon you get

Spiced smells
Rich smells
Festive smells
With their welcome
Their excitement
That do something to you
The Christmas Candle...

The hymn O Come, O Come Emmanuel
Is an almost Christmas Carol
Getting us ready for an almost Christmas.

This is a getting ready for the time when the air tingles
And the laughter is ready
And the presents usher in the importance of relationships
And Advent is time to get ready for all of this...

Until you come to the Advent readings
Which always seem to ruin Christmas spirit...

Matthew 24

Here is Matthew chapter 24, what is sometimes called the mini-Apocalypse
Jesus is standing on the Mount of Olives
Someone has invited him to admire the temple buildings
And he seems provoked into saying that one day soon,
All these buildings will be torn down....

Woe to those who are pregnant

And if you ever thought that Christmas was a time for children
... and to those who are nursing infants in those days

And he carries on

*The sun will be darkened
The stars will fall from heaven
The powers of heaven will be shaken..*

This does not feel like Christmas
This feels more like an end time rapture service
And this language fits more with the outdoor edge of Christian experience
Than it does with mainstream, sensible presbyterians.
This is the language of people who believe that God has given them the right to bring concealed firearms to Church, to protest against the government, and to stockpile groceries and ammunition in the forests of Montana.

About that day and our no one knows

*For as the days of Noah,
So will be the coming of the Son of Man*

*Keep awake therefore
Because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*

*If the owner of the household had known
In what part of the night
The thief was coming*

Jesus seems to be comparing himself to a thief here.

Therefore you also must be ready

For the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The Rapturists

The texts that we are reading today belong to a set of texts which are beloved of a group of Christians who are obsessed with the end-times.

End-times thinking goes something like this...

At the end of time, a figure called the anti-Christ will appear - this is predicted in 2 Thessalonians

And end times prophets have associated this with the birth mark of Mikhail Gorbachev

Or President Reagan, because his full name, Ronald Wilson Reagan had 6 letters in each of the names, - 666

And the prophet will make some kind of peace treaty with Israel

And reinstate temple worship - this is predicted in Ezekiel 37

And then after three years - as predicted in the book of Daniel - the sacrifice will be ended

And a great tribulation will begin in which you will only be able to trade if you have the mark of the beast - as predicted in Revelation 13

And then Jesus will return as predicted here in Matthew 24

And the people of God will be returned to the New Jerusalem.

This end-times theology in its current dominant form, has not been around for as long as you might think. Christians have only believed something like this since it was first published in an Anglo-English clergyman called John Nelson Darby, and made popular, particularly in America through his translation of the Bible, and through a version of the Bible which promoted his teachings, called the Scofield Reference Bible.

You can see the attraction of such a story

It is full of colour and the spectacular - there are beasts and dragons, and wars and fire, and vultures and thieves in the night

When religion has become dull, sedate and predictable, this is full of drama.

And there is a joy in being able to tell the future.

Even though not knowing when this is going to happen so totally important to Jesus

That even he does not know when this is going to happen.

That has not stopped dispensationalists predicting the future and the end of the World,
Like the Great Disappointment of 1844
Or the Jehovah's Witness prediction of 1918

And people are so attached to the certainty that these predictions bring
That they will resist all kinds of excuses even when everything goes wrong.
So in the 1980s a Nasa Engineer called Edgar C Whisenant produced a booklet called
"88 reasons why the world will end in 1988"
He was not put off, when the world did not end in 1988
And produced a further publication called
"89 reasons why the world will end in 1989"

But though the temptation is to mock those Dispensationalist Christians
A bit like Noah was probably mocked by his contemporaries as he built the ark
At least they have something
At least the hope of Jesus means something to them
Rather than having to explain away the fire and end up with a faith that is predictable, untroubling
and bland.

Prophetic Hyperbole

So what do we do with these passages from Jesus...

Before we come back that question,

Let us say a word about the kind of language that Jesus uses

It is sometimes called Prophetic Hyperbole

Prophetic hyperbole is used when a prophet has a vision, a sense of the the move of God, that is
so disturbing, so unsettling, and demands such a radical response

That they must use fantastical, sweeping, poetic and provocative language to describe the power
of what is about to happen

Sensible language is not called for here

In fact sensible language, rational language, measured language, is not sufficient

And does not pay attention to the truth of what is being said.

Prophetic language is also necessary because you perceive the whole universe being connected
to itself, that the great powers of this world are all linked to spiritual entities, so you will use the
language of the planets and the stars to speak of the heavenly realms, the spirituality of the great
armies and empires of this earth.

So Isaiah will prophecy the end of the great empire of Babylon,

He says that armies will gather to destroy the whole earth
And that the stars of heaven will not give their light
The sun will be dark at its rising
And the heavens will tremble

That day did happen
And the great spiritual power of Babylon was broken
And the only language you could use to describe the power of this
Was to say that the earth, your understanding of the earth had been destroyed.

Or in Zephaniah chapter 1,
A prophecy against Judah
God says that he will utterly sweep everything from across the face of the earth
And this did come to pass when Judah was destroyed
And it was as if the whole world had been destroyed
That was the language that you had to reach for.

And that day did indeed happen when Zephaniah was destroyed.

And this language appears again in Isaiah, in Ezekiel, in Amos, in Zechariah
Where the prophet must use sweeping language.

And Jesus the same,
He says that the sun will be darkened
And that the moon will not give its light
And the temple will be destroyed
And he says all of those things will happen in the lifetime of his generation
And he was right
Because in AD70 the armies did come and destroy the temple
And the powers were at work
So that the sun was darkened
And the moon did not give its light
Because the temple was the very focal point of creation
And when it was gone
The creation of world was also undone.

So if I have said that all these things happened
In the generations of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Jesus...

What use are those words for today?

The first is to say that the language of prophetic hyperbole is still needed to shock us from our compliance, and to show the terror that might still be unleashed in the world.

It was used by leaders Apartheid South Africa, the language of the beast which attacked them
I know that it is used by those who campaign for rights of asylum
I am sure that it must have been used in Ukraine

And when we read Jesus in Luke's Gospel
"There will be distress among the nations because of the roaring of the seas and the waves, and people will faint from fear and foreboding because of what is coming upon the earth"
We are not far away from climate catastrophe.

In the world, this is sometimes the language that you need.

And secondly this is the place for hope.

What Isaiah saw in his generation
And Zephaniah saw in his generation
And Jesus saw in his generation
Keeps happening in every generation.

There are arise powers,
And the people of God are summoned to hope.

And this is the connection with Christmas
Because if you believe that Jesus is the coming of hope, in spite of all the powers of the world
And all that seems to be going wrong,
Then we are summoned to that kind of Christmas
The Christmas which is indeed about hope.

I like the idea of what Christmas was before the carols and the presents and the Victorian Christmas
I am not against the Victorian Christmas, but I think we profit ourselves if we see what came before
It was the lighting of candles
It was the waiting for hope
That God who is able to hold on to our hope in every generation.
Political hopes and personal hopes.

This is why these passages are Christmassy,
But actually the older, more ancient version of Christmas
Where we prepare ourselves for the arrival of Christ
Who continually comes into our world
To meet our hope, and to transform, and to bring justice
And to summon us to walk with him
This happens in every generation
And Christmas was the time when with candles and with hope,
People made themselves ready for the meeting of Jesus.

In the passage that we read today, of the nations going up to Jerusalem, the city of peace,
There is a line about beating their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

When I was in Cambuslang, we once invited an artist to help us transform one of the bare walls in
our hall, to represent the area, and we asked that she allow us to reflect our area.

So we put up a miner's lamp to remember the coal mining
And we put up a hoover to remember the Hoover factory in which so thousands had worked
And we wanted to put up some steel to reflect the steel works
So I contacted one of the guys who still worked in the steel works, and asked if we could get a
small amount of Cambuslang steel to put up on our wall.

That's going to be difficult he said - Cambuslang steel is plate steel, if you want Cambuslang steel
in your hall you're going to have to park a JCB in your hall.

Eventually thought he said he could get me a bit of thick plate steel
And before sending it, he said, "Would you like us to engrave a bible verse on it"
I always love it when non-Churchgoers are keener to use the Bible than we are.
I thought long and hard, what would be a verse in the Bible that could connect to steel
Until coming up with this verse
Isaiah 2:4
"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation
Neither shall they learn war no more"

And he said to me, it's funny Neil that you should choose that verse
Because that is what happened in Cambuslang steelworks at the end of the Second World War
The plant was used to turn military vehicles into agricultural equipment
Tanks into ploughs
Armoured cars into combine harvesters

And I thought of how that verse would have been read by soldiers and families and people bombed in Cambuslang, and they would've hoped that God could have given hope
God could do this
And they would have believed that this was for them.

I think of those praying this in Tigray
Those in Ukraine who prayed this
Those in South Africa
Those who yearned for the end of Communism
That Christians having to rebuild faith in the time of Matthew after the loss of temple
This is the place where your deepest hopes can marry with the hope of the coming of God.

Get Ready

Hope in the Bible is never a thing that happens to you
It's something that you participate in.

I think of the way that Isaiah prophesied that the nations would come to Jerusalem
And that that is what happened
And the people went up to Jerusalem.

And Jesus here is saying Get Ready
Get Ready for what God is going to do
Do not go to sleep.
Get the house ready?

What does that mean...?

It means the thing that you have been putting off that you know needs to be done
The habit that needs to be lost
The decision that needs to be made
The truth that needs to be told

The ordering that needs to happen in disordering
It means creating a certain emptiness
Because you have cluttered as a way of numbing your truest hopes
And the distractions that you have used to hide from your pain
And the business you have employed because you no longer believe in Jesus
You no longer believe that he is going to come.

Get the house ready
Get it ready
You know what he is saying to you
Get the house ready
And when the hour is right and unexpected
He will come

AMEN