

## Advent Sunday 2016

### Matt. 24:36-44

It has faded somewhat, I'm afraid, after twenty odd years of being in England but my Northern Ireland accent used to be a great advantage of a preacher. People said it made them sit up. There was a certain roughness, a certain harshness to it, which gave preaching a gratifying kind of bite. Sometimes of course, they just didn't understand me. When I was a curate, the parish were mystified for days as to why Jesus kept getting into a 'boot', and they found the parable of the 'Sewer' hilarious. Apparently in genteel England you have 'boats' and 'Sowers'. Most of the time, though, the accent was an advantage. One of the comments I treasure from a university colleague came when they found I was leaving. 'I'll miss your accent,' he said, 'I'll miss the way you used to welcome us to chapel. It was welcome ... with a faint air of menace.'

Welcome, with a faint air of menace. The Jesus we believe in is big and broad and warm in welcome. People who had no right to expect a welcome from God, got one in Jesus. The broken, the bad, the failures, all the people who thought they were not good enough and who other people were sure were not good enough.... Jesus welcomed these people. He threw his arms around them, and he gathered them in. That is the Jesus we love to remember, and to preach.

But there is another side to Jesus. Alongside the welcome, there is what you can reasonably call a faint air of menace. And in today's Gospel reading, it is rather more than faint. Today's Gospel, you might say, was made to be read in a Northern Ireland accent. It is all about a shocking surprise, and a sharp division. Jesus is talking about the future. He says it will be just like the past: people will just be getting on with their lives, with all their ordinary preoccupations, eating and drinking, marrying, building their futures and then .... Boom. God acts. The Son of Man – Jesus Himself – comes in glory. Judgement happens. Each life is tested, each individual life – and a sharp division is made between those lives that belong in God's new world, and those that do not.

I have no clever preacher's way off this particular hook. I have nothing to say that will make the sharpness, the difficulty, the menace of what Jesus says here go away. His teaching is clear. A new world is coming, where He will be King. That world will be like Him: it will be full of love, of joy, generosity and peace. Only people whose lives are about love, and joy, and generosity and peace belong in that new world. Its coming will expose those whose lives are not. If your life is *actually* about self-indulgence, greed, pride and dominating others ... you will have no share in the new world. You do not belong there. You will not get in.

At this point, if you are not shifting uncomfortably in your seat, you should be. It would be a very brave and probably rather stupid person who really thought they had nothing to worry about when it came to self-indulgence, greed, pride and the rest. Even if those things aren't obvious in our lives, they are often there subtly. They certainly are in my life. I try my best to overcome them, and through effort and prayer and because of Jesus I *hope* they are losing their grip, I *believe* they are losing their grip. You have known me for ten weeks now, so no doubt you are beginning to form your own views on that score. But ultimately it is not what I think, or what you think, which matters. It is what God thinks – the One who sees right into our hearts and knows what we are *really* like, without delusion, without distortion, without muddle: the One whose judgement is simply perfect. That is the scrutiny which will one day examine us, and give a final verdict.

And Jesus says, 'be ready.' Be ready, at any moment, for the new world to arrive and for it to be clear whether you are in, or whether you are out. To which the obvious response is: *how* can I be ready? I am not perfect, I am not anywhere near perfect, I'm just an ordinary person with all the

muddle and mess and complexity of everyone else, all the same ragbag mix of good and bad. No matter how hard I try, I could not be ready for God's judgement. I cannot keep it up for five minutes, let alone all the time. I'm not Jesus. So how on earth to be ready?

To which, I suppose, there are two very closely related answers.

Number 1: don't stop trying. Fine, you are a mess. Fine, you find yourself stuck in the same old sins again and again. The answer to this is *not* to decide that after all, God doesn't really mind that much, that that lovely Jesus is bound to love you whatever you do. No, the answer is to keep trying. It doesn't matter if you screw up again and again and again. It does matter if you stop trying, and sit down content with anything less than perfection.

Number 2: (this, by the way, is the tricky and confusing bit). At the same time as you keep trying .... remember that isn't actually *the* most important thing. It important, but not *that* important. It will never make you good enough for the kingdom of God. Full Stop. Trying only matters and only helps when it flows from the right deep down attitude of the heart. What God really needs, what Jesus really looks for, is not your moral effort. He looks straight through that, to where it comes from, and he looks for the heart that is saying, 'God, I know I was made for more than this. I know I was made for a world of perfect joy, perfect love, perfect freedom. I also know I am not ready for that world. I know only You can make me so. So please, please do it.' Or as I put it in another sermon a few weeks ago, four simple words: 'I'm broken. Please help.'

And the good news is that when God sees even the faintest flicker of *that* heart, He will do the rest. It can sometimes be buried deep, deep down. It can sometimes be barely articulate or even conscious. It does not necessarily involve being Christian. But if even the faintest flicker of that heart is there, God will act. That's what the Cross was all about. We were never going to be made for the Kingdom of God by trying very, very hard. It was always going to a matter of God coming into our failure, into our misery, to find us and bring us home. All that is really left for us to do is to let him. 'I'm broken, please help.'

So if you want to be ready for the judgement of God, whether that comes when you die or when Jesus returns, this is what you need to do:

First: *Try*. Put all your heart, all your soul, all your strength into loving the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself. Try, try, and try again – through all your sins and failures.

But Second, and even more so: learn to say to God, deep within yourself: I am broken - please help. I am not ready - please make me ready. Very, very simple words. But they can take a lifetime to pray one's way into, to make them the deepest voice of your heart, to make you ready for the coming judgement and the coming Kingdom. Whether you started praying them or words like them a long time ago, or whether this all sounds fresh, there are few better ways you could spend your Advent than setting serious time aside for this prayer. It will be the best preparation for Christmas, and the best preparation for the coming of the Son of Man to judge the living and the dead.