

Advent Sunday A 2/12/07

Matthew 24:37-44

Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
Matthew 24:42

Earlier this week, I employed the help of some of the younger members of the congregation to do a little bit of furniture moving. My wife's grandmother is moving out of her house in St John Street, and had kindly offered us the bench from her garden to move into ours. So on Tuesday night, before we sat down to watch a film, some of our young men assisted me by walking up the road, picking up this bench and carrying it back to Beaumont St. All was going well until, half way across the road, we were met by a police car. It stopped. Down came the window, out came the question "Where did you get that?" It was at this point I remembered that I didn't have my dog collar in.

We couldn't blame the policewoman for asking. This is a university town, the people carrying the bench were all students, it was the evening, and the police in Oxford spend too much of their valuable time dealing with people a little the worse for wear who do indeed do things such as walking off with park benches. Her reaction to an extraordinary

sight was perfectly reasonable, as was her acceptance that our motives were lawful.

In the world of the gospels, strange goings on are often referred to as signs. Events which are out of the ordinary are held to point beyond themselves at something supernatural, or at some significant future event which we would be able to predict were we only able to interpret these signs correctly. Those who question Jesus about the end time share these sorts of assumptions. If something important is to happen, what will we see which will act as a warning for us, how will we know when to be ready?

In our gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus is clear: you won't know, and you won't be ready. As it was in the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. When the flood came, everyone was going about normal day to day business – only Noah was prepared for the Lord's purifying action. Likewise, the Son of Man is coming at an hour that no-one expects. In fact, the only thing we can be sure of, Jesus has already suggested, is that if someone is certain that now is the time or here is the place, that person should be ignored. If anyone says to you "Look, here is the Messiah", do not believe him. When it happens, it will catch us in the midst of our work, as we go about our daily lives.

For many people, Advent means a preparation for Christmas, and nothing more. However, the Christian church has always been clear that in order to look back we need to look forward, and vice versa. If we want to understand the judgement of God which will surely come, our eyes should be fixed on the story of Jesus Christ, God with us, who comes among us as a stranger and an outcast, a refugee in danger of his life, a leader and a holy man destined for betrayal, condemnation and death. Judgement comes among us in the person of a man dying in agony on a cross.

But in Matthew's gospel in particular, looking backwards is never going to be enough, for we will completely fail to grasp the importance of that bizarre and worrying story if we fail to appreciate that it is a story about us and about our present. Jesus is not gone from the life of the church, but is present among us as a living reality. It is Matthew who calls Jesus "Emmanuel", God with us. It is Matthew who has Jesus say the familiar words, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them"; and it is Matthew who ends his gospel with the words of Jesus "I am with you always, to the close of the age". When we look back at the stories of Jesus arrival among us, and at the records of his words, deeds and death, we do so in the knowledge that his risen presence is something which can never depart.

If we locate the advent of Jesus, his coming among us, solely in the birth narratives that we shall sing and tell in the coming weeks, we create a problem for ourselves. Jesus words are clear: the son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Our annual failing is to contradict him: we do expect it, we do know when he is coming. It's midnight on the 25th December.

It's a natural approach, and a safe one. The coming of Jesus belongs in the distant past, and we shall reenact that past and celebrate that advent as part of our rejoicing in the miracle of the Word made flesh. As long as it's in the past, it can't interfere with us too much, and we can get on with enjoying ourselves. That's precisely why the church observes advent – the history of God's acts is never so tidily located and never so neatly completed. The judgement of God is coming, and it is coming upon you and upon me.

But if the safe option is closed to us, how genuinely alarming is the other extreme, the prophet of doom approach? If we're honest, we simply don't believe that the world is about to end, that the Son of Man is to appear in the clouds of heaven some time during the next four weeks. That opposite attitude is almost as secure. It just won't happen, and so we're OK.

But perhaps, just perhaps, there's a third alternative, an option far more terrifying than the gory stories of Herod or the apocalyptic visions of Revelation. Perhaps, Matthew tells us, we're looking entirely in the wrong place. Yes, Advent instructs us to look back and to look forward, but perhaps that looking is chiefly for our benefit in the here and now, so that we know where we are, so that we have all our bearings, rather as though I might look up and down a street in order to know where I am. Having looked behind and before, we have no excuse not to realize the situation in which we find ourselves.

So ask yourself this question, because I think it's the question Matthew would ask you were he here: which is the more worrying? Option one – that the presence of Jesus and the judgement it brings to the world is over and done with in the past; option two – that the presence of Jesus and the judgement it brings are imminent, about to happen, ready to fall from the sky at any second? Or option three? For perhaps, just perhaps, the presence of Jesus and the judgement it brings is already among us, is here and now and yesterday and tomorrow in your life and in mine, in everything which we see and say and do. Something unnoticed, something unexpected, but something real, something unavoidable, something which brings the judgement of God's love upon everything we think we know. Imagine that that presence is actually among us, and imagine that we had failed to respond. Now that is a frightening thought.