

WATCH OUT!

Matthew 24.36-44

A bicycle wheel goes round and round but it is moving forward, not standing still. So it is with the church year - Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost. Advent means the coming or arrival. God's rescue operation for humans and the world had begun but it was not yet completed. Jesus really did launch God's Kingdom 'on earth as in heaven'; but it was clear that it would then need to make its way through the humble self-giving service of Jesus' followers towards the time when Jesus would return. Matthew's gospel goes into all this in detail.

In our reading today, Jesus does not point to the violence that filled the earth in Noah's time, nor to the infamous sins of Sodom. The prevailing experience of the doomed generation is that of immersion in the daily round of ordinary human pursuits – eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting and building. These are not forbidden activities but when we carry self-satisfied absorption in these busy routines as overwhelming disaster is about to strike, we are likely to miss what is most important. Most human beings are fully absorbed in consumption, production, commerce and self-gratification. Throughout the Bible there is a vivid sense of the unexpected suddenness with which total destruction can come. Again and again the prophets cried out to the people around them, nearly all of whom were lulled by the seeming calm and fully caught up in their own affairs.

The Bible portrays Noah as a righteous man in God's eyes, separated from the increasingly sinful world around him. Because of his uprightness, God selects him, along with his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth to build the ark and survive the incoming deluge. What really floods the people of Noah's time is not the water but their failure to become to become what God intends them to be.

Does the thought of the world ending have any impact on us? What if it was we who were about to be bombed rather than the Syrians? When Jesus likens his second coming to a great flood, what truths can we learn from the Noah story? Is there an ark on the horizon for us? Do we usually think of 'a man taken in the field' and the woman 'taken while she's grinding corn' as blessed or hard done by? How much would it matter what we were doing if the second coming were to happen now?

Advent is not about passive waiting but active preparation. Today we are called to wake up and watch for Jesus, not by looking nervously over our shoulders, but by paying attention to the details of our lives – our work and our relaxation, our love and our hate, our courage and our fear.

The four candles of Advent represent the time of waiting - HOPE, LIGHT, JOY, PEACE and CHRIST.

HOPE – as we begin preparing for Christmas, people have many hopes. What are yours? We hope that the weather will be OK for the holidays. This

lacks a sense of certainty; it's more like a wish, so we keep our fingers crossed.

Hope is a fragile commodity. It was so when Jesus came. The once proud nation was now a puppet state of the pagan Roman Empire. The ordinary person lived under the burden of the religious establishment. Centuries before they had been promised a deliverer who would restore Israel. Wonder if they thought, 'I don't want to get my hopes up.'

Hope is not a granted wish or a favour performed, It is a deep dependence on God. The good news of Christmas is that God brought hope to all people, regardless of their background. We realize again that God does not work by coercion nor by legislative decree. God's method for change is not top down; God takes on human form and enables the Christ Child to grow in a backwater town. The Messiah will tell his followers to 'turn the other cheek' and a publicity campaign will be carried out by fishermen.

The promise of Christmas is that God is in it for the long haul – the long haul of individual transformation. Once more this Christmas, Christians will celebrate the birth of their Messiah. In defiance of recent events, we will continue to place our hopes for justice and peace in this Child who grew up to suffer too.

'So – as we begin another Advent and we prepare for another Christmas, let's pause and ponder...Does our celebration of Advent and Christmas make any real difference in reality to our lives? Or will we go through it again as we have done every year, with the same old rituals and fuss which last but a few days before life returns to normal and its as though nothing ever happened? Can we re-imagine the whole Advent-Christmas season as an anticipation of God's hope and promise breaking into our world, into our time and into our lives inviting us to want to see God's purposes fulfilled? Can we re-imagine the whole Advent Christmas season as an invitation, a bit like Lent, to reassess our attitudes, our values, our way of life... so that Christ may be incarnated yet again through us...?'

This week, let us cling to HOPE as we stay awake that we may be ready for the coming of God among us. AMEN

