



THE IMPORTANCE OF NOW

Mark 13:24-37

We come to our End of Year Staff Thanksgiving Service, which coincides with Advent Sunday, as it sometimes does. This can present challenges, because in one we look back over the past year, and in the other we anticipate the future. However, I think it appropriate that they fall together as they are intricately linked to one another.

The roots of the season of Advent stem back to the fourth century, possibly to France in northern Europe. Originally it extended for seven weeks, before being reduced to four Sundays. This year it will feel much shorter than ever and we will be interrupted by Christmas any time soon! There are those who are making an argument for a longer Advent; the contention being that we are fortunate if we succeed in having two weeks of an Advent emphasis at present.

The message of Advent can be summed up in three striking phrases:

- Jesus Christ has come
- Jesus Christ is come
- Jesus Christ is coming

Our scripture passage for Advent, read for us earlier, confronts us with some strange, ominous, apocalyptic images. Writers have much to say on this matter, frequently in relation to the temple which was a great centre of national pride, but would soon be destroyed. In times of trial and testing, we need to seek to put our faith in God's purposes being worked out.

Apart from Mark 4, this is the longest discourse of Jesus in the whole gospel. The attention shifts from the actions of Jesus and his disciples to a larger "end of time" narrative.

Verse 32 has been identified as an independent saying which rejects the thought that any human being knows God's plan for the end of time. The fact that no-one knows, not even Jesus himself, strengthens the overriding thought that we have to be constantly ready.

Thomas Friedman is an American-Jewish, popular yet thought-provoking journalist who about a year ago published a book entitled *Thank you for being late: Finding a Job, Running a Country and Keeping your Head in an Age of Accelerations*.

Like so many, Friedman looks at the amazing world that technological advance has created for us. Things are now moving with such rapidity that we find it difficult to keep up with change, let alone to be able to discuss how changes can be harnessed to our advantage.

Those of us who have had the joy and frustration of being part of a family travelling in a car together on a lengthy journey will know that the pressing question for children is invariable "Are we there yet?" And this is often followed by "What time is it?"

That very same question, asked in the reality of Friedman's world, is appropriate at the end of a year and as we begin Advent. The thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel has a patchwork of quotations and images interwoven with the announcement that Jesus Christ will be coming back.

Most modern homes don't have a door-keeper. It is the responsibility of the owners to lock up and invariably set the burglar alarm. But things are changing for some in large cities, as an increasing number live in apartment blocks where someone is employed to look after the entrance to the building.



The first requirement of all gate-keepers is to be awake. This is a solemn word; Jesus Christ calls us to be ready, not only at one point in time, but for all time. For those who are captivated by Jesus Christ's final coming, their challenge is also to keep awake. Tom Wright warned us that however attracted we might feel, we must not sit down working out a prophetic timeline—we must be people of today!

These thoughts make a connection with our work too, for we are living in turbulent times, when the type of work we carry out is under more scrutiny than ever before.

It is significant that Jesus Christ tells his disciples that he is not in a position to tell them when the end of time will come. The key word in the whole passage, therefore, is 'Watch'. We are called not only to watch for the coming of Jesus Christ, but also to be watching for the growing expressions of urgency and need in our community.

The nature of the final coming of Jesus Christ is mentioned close to 250 times in the New Testament, even though it is often neglected by some Christians—and clearly misunderstood by others! This return will be:

- Unprecedented – it will mark out human history
- Unmistakeable – in great contrast to his first coming
- Unexpected – even Jesus refused to offer a timetable

If we hold to the Advent theme and seek to relate it to the real circumstances in our caring work in the wider community, we cannot:

- Avoid the economic circumstances which presently challenge very many in our community
- Dismiss the moral and ethical issues which have to be faced. I recently had a vigorous conversation with a close friend who kept saying on a moral issue, "But that is their choice!" There is far more to most moral and ethical issues than this.
- Ignore that change is happening all around our world—we see it in Zimbabwe, Korea, Syria and a myriad of other places, such as the recent painful happenings in places like Egypt.

We need to be a watchful people.

We recognise the different aspects and three in particular strike me as being important:-

We need to be on our guard

Throughout our long history, Wesley Mission has had to face the challenge of many changes but, at the same time, we have needed to be on our guard that, in the midst of such change, we do not abandon those values which distinguish us and help define just who we are.

This thirteenth chapter of Mark does not "hold out great encouragement for triumphalistic or prosperity versions of Christianity." By the time these words were written and articulated in the early Christian community, many Christians were under enormous pressure, which frequently involved rejection.

In recent decades, this has been a daily reality for Christians in South America, South Africa, Eastern Europe and large areas of Asia. Any true call to discipleship will always take seriously the need to be on our guard, because the pressures are very real.



Dallas Willard, in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, concludes, “When Jesus walked among humankind, there was a certain simplicity to being a disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of study, obedience and invitation.” Today, the call is much more complex and it often means standing firm in the most discouraging of circumstances.

While on his South Pole expedition, the explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton left a few of his team on Elephant Island, promising that he would return. Later, as he sought to fulfil that promise and tried to go back, huge icebergs blocked the way. But suddenly, as if by a miracle, an avenue opened in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through.

His team, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. As soon as the ship had cleared the island, the ice crashed together behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his people, “It was fortunate that you were all packed and ready to go!” One of them replied on behalf of them all, “We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, ‘He may come today.’”

We need to be alert

For the Christian, the return of Christ and the complexity of serving him in the world today is not a riddle to be solved, but a priority for constant attention.

Advent is a time for radical reassessment, during a period of instability. For us, it is a time to examine what God has called us to—and yet, at the same time, it holds to the miracle and promise of “the new” breaking out in us. Advent is a time of repentance when our hearts and minds can engage with change.

It is very easy to miss the obvious. Prior to coming to Australia, we had to do that job that everyone moving house has to undertake—we had to throw away all the rubbish. It is a sign that we did not plan this move too far in advance that I had to hire a van and one of the boys helped me to fill it up with rubbish to take to the tip. The van was hired until 5pm and we arrived at the tip at 4.45!

We quickly threw everything into the appropriate huge skip and walked back to the van. I looked for the key... and it was nowhere to be found. We returned to the skip and after five minutes we caught sight of the key amongst the debris. In a most un-superintendent-like fashion, I scrambled through the rubbish to retrieve the key.

Fortunately, as I returned the van a little late, the man at the hire company took pity on me when he saw my dishevelled appearance.

St Augustine of Hippo said, “Time is a threefold present: the present as we experience it, the past as a present memory and the future as a present expectation.”

This is one of the reasons why we must make careful use of fragments of our time. It is wonderful how much we can achieve by making careful use of time in this way. A great deal of study, or writing, or other work can be done by a resolute will in odd quarters of an hour; very often when no other time is available. We regularly use the common saying – “If you want something done, ask a busy person.” This is because such a person has discovered the secret of economising time within the context of the larger picture.



We need to keep watch

As it indicated earlier, we shall soon move towards Christmas and part of the narrative will refer to shepherds “keeping watch over their flocks by night”. By contrast, we recall that the disciples were not able to keep watch with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Keeping watch for Christ and the priorities of his kingdom which has come, is coming and will come is something to which we need to give a priority.

Bill Clinton was only 30 years of age when he was appointed Attorney-General of Arkansas. He was elected State Governor just two years later, easily becoming the youngest person in modern times to hold such a position. He was a youthful 44 when he was elected President of the United States and still holds the distinction of being the youngest person ever to leave the office of President. In other words, the vast majority of Clinton’s life and accomplishments were characterised by youth.

In August 2006, during his 60th Birthday celebration, a melancholy Clinton reluctantly admitted that life had changed. No longer the youthful saxophonist wailing away on MTV, the white-haired former President said, “For most of my working life, I was the youngest person doing what I was doing. Then one day I woke up and I was the oldest person in the room ...”

Forty-two years ago, I was a young student at Cliff College training in evangelism and mission. At weekends we were sent out preaching and looked on the list to see where we were allocated. One late November evening, I was told I would be preaching in the Clay Cross Circuit in the village of Tibshelf. I was further informed that it would be a youth service and I was asked to offer the challenge to the young people that they should follow Jesus Christ.

On the Sunday afternoon, prior to travelling to fulfil my preaching appointment, I fell down the main stone staircase of the college. My ankle was clearly damaged and yet, as I was a passionate person, I ignored the advice of friends to seek medical attention.

When I arrived at the church in the evening, it was packed to the gunwales and, later in the service, I began preaching to 500 young people. All was going well until there was an electricity power cut and I stood in the pulpit in the dark with a swollen ankle, desperately fearful that the situation might fall apart.

Fast-forward over twenty years—and I was conducting worship in North Wales. After the morning service, I was shaking hands with large numbers of people, many of whom were on holiday. A young family with two children came to the door and I asked them, “Where do you come from?” The father smiled and said, “We’re from Tibshelf.” And I began to recall my story, albeit very swiftly. The father then said, “Yes, I remember it well. I found Christ that night.”

I still get a swollen ankle to help me remember that evening. However, I recall much more than that particular occasion—I am reminded how God can bless us in the difficult places and in the complex challenges of our modern world.

As we look back and take stock of the past, as we consider the very real challenges of the present, we do so in the conscious recognition that God is always ahead of us!