

Introduction

One of the things I really enjoy doing is taking a day trip to France with one of my best friends. We leave very early and get back quite late. Being someone who likes to be organised I always make sure that all the preparations for my following day's work are done so that I could just get up and start work prepared. I also, liking to be organized, prepare everything for my trip. My clothes chosen and on a chair and the sandwiches made. The money in my bag with my passport and sweets for the journey.... You can see I'm someone who doesn't like to leave much to chance and likes to know that they are prepared for what is coming.

However there are things that we might know could come and we don't know when Is it possible to still be prepared for them? Well in fact in some cases we have to be

When I worked in Hackney I was a member of the Deanery emergency response team and as such know that I could be called out at any time if there was a major incident, to offer support to the emergency services and give pastoral care to the injured and to the workers. If there was a major incident and I was called out there would be no point in beginning to decide what I might need and get things together – if I did that things might be all over before I could get there.

So I had an emergency pack which I could just pick up and take with me. *High vis jacket, boots, torch,*

notepad and pen, bottle of water and chocolate bar, prayer book.

As a vicar I know that there may be times when I am called on to provide hospitality to any number of people with little warning. If need be I like to be able to offer people lunch as and when appropriate. There isn't time to plan for that or to rush out to the shops so I keep a well stocked freezer and cupboard and have this recipe book: *The resourceful cook. (or what to cook when there is nothing to cook!)*

So you can see I am someone who likes to be prepared and I hope I am prepared both for the things I know are coming and for the unexpected. – Or rather the expected but unscheduled.

It is the expected but unscheduled that Jesus is warning his followers about here in today's gospel reading.

Today is Advent Sunday. Advent of course means "coming" and this period of four weeks running up to Christmas is the time when we prepare for Jesus' coming. Both the expected coming which we know we will be celebrating on the 25th December and the unexpected which may happen at any time when he returns in glory to judge the world.

It's easy enough to be prepared for Christmas day and the celebration of Jesus' birth. It may be a busy time and we might lose sight of what it's all about as we rush around buying presents, putting up decorations and preparing a Christmas meal but we do know when

it's going to happen and as long as we put our minds to it we can be prepared.

It's not so easy to be prepared for the second coming of Jesus or the time when we will die and meet him in heaven because no one knows when the end is coming. Not even the angels know and Jesus tells us that he doesn't either the only person who knows is God himself. Life will go on as normal right up to the time when Jesus returns and so Jesus tells us his followers must stay awake like people who know there are going to be surprise visitors sooner or later but who don't know exactly when.

Jesus gives the example of the people in Noah's time who were unaware of the coming judgement and disaster. They just carried on their daily lives, they ate and drank, they married and raised families and the day of the flood caught them totally by surprise. Now of course Jesus isn't saying don't bother about food or relationships or work, but the point he is making is that while we carry on our daily lives we need to have our priorities sorted out. This is a warning not to become so immersed in time that we forget eternity, a warning not to become so focused on our life on earth that we forget God and the things of heaven. He is warning us never to let our concerns with worldly affairs; however necessary, to distract us from remembering that there is a God and that issues of life and death are in his hands.

The point that Jesus is making is that it is possible to prepare for his return – not by knowing when that will be but by living a life of constant readiness, by

responding to God's warnings to us and by walking daily with God so that when we see him face to face it will simply be an extension of our daily lives and not a terrible shock.

I have my store cupboard ready and used to have my emergency pack full so that I won't be caught out. Jesus is encouraging us to develop our relationship with him so that when he returns we will simply need to say, "Oh there you are; How lovely to see you in person!" and not need to say, "Could you come back another day because I'm not ready for this.!"

Jesus draws a graphic picture of people simply carrying on their daily lives. They fall into two categories: the prepared, who will therefore be saved and the unprepared, who will be lost. There isn't a difference in work or situation that determines what will happen but a difference in readiness.

One of the measures I use in my own life is to ask myself a couple of questions:

1. If I knew Jesus was returning today what would I spend my time doing? The ideal of course is that I would do what I planned to do anyway because I would be living as Jesus asks me to and doing the things he requires of me.

And the second question is:

2. If Jesus were here in the room with me would I be comfortable doing this or saying this.

That way I can make sure that I am living in the way he has called me to and not taken my eyes off the ball.

Romans 13:11-end

Matthew 24:36-44

It is all too easy to become immersed in the world in which we live, to take on their priorities and attitudes and forget who we are as God's children and what we have been called to be.

Another very helpful measure is the following scenario. Imagine that we lived in a society, as many people around the world do today, where it was illegal to be a Christian and where, like the early Christians there could be a possibility of being arrested and punished for being a Christian. If you were arrested and taken before the court accused of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you? Is there evidence of your faith in the way you live and speak and carry out your work and family life?

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives: On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamour for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be lights as we watch and wait.

In advent, each week we light a candle as we prepare to welcome Jesus at Christmas. The lights remind us that Jesus is the light of the world coming to bring his

Romans 13:11-end**Matthew 24:36-44**

light into our dark world. When he returns and comes to us here in the four church Benefice will he find that the light is already shining bright in our lives and illuminating our neighbourhood. Will our faith be strong and will we be living lives that show God's love and purity? When Jesus returns will there already be a candle in the window to welcome him?