

**1 Corinthians 1:3-9****Mark 13: 24-37****Introduction**

As many of you know my mother is in her late eighties and, though physically quite limited now, is still mentally very alert. She spends her time doing puzzles, and crosswords, reading and doing art projects. For the past few years she has also enjoyed a weekly discussion with some Jehovah's Witnesses who come to see her regularly. She has no intention of becoming a Jehovah's Witness but she enjoys the company and the discussion.

In March, just as we went into lockdown one of her visitors phoned her to say she wouldn't be coming for a while and also said to her, "The pestilence is upon us! Prepare for Armageddon!" My mother was amused but also said to me, "Well you know she has a point!" When you think about all the wars and the natural disasters we must be pretty near the end times.

The end times are the times in which we live. And they began when Jesus ascended to heaven with the promise that he would return again in glory to judge the world. Ever since then people have been looking forward to his return, predicting when it might be and warning of the judgement to come. Jesus himself predicted the coming judgement – as we read in today's Gospel reading but the devastation he was talking about was the judgement on the Jewish nation which came in AD70 when Jerusalem was defeated by the Romans and the Temple destroyed.

Throughout the Gospels we read of Jesus' warnings to the Jewish leaders that unless they listened their nation would be destroyed. As so often happens in Scripture, prophecies – God's word into a situation, have both and immediate and a future application. And the message is the same; which here is "Judgement is coming, be ready".

In advent we take time to prepare and we are preparing both to celebrate God incarnate at Christmas when Jesus came amongst us as a human being and to remind ourselves that this Lord Jesus will be coming again and this time in Judgement. For the Christians in the early church Jesus' return was a very present reality. They were expecting it. Many of them had followed Jesus when he was on earth - or at least knew someone who had, and the story of his resurrection and ascension was a very present reality. They took his warnings of judgement to come seriously. And some, especially the young Christian converts in Thessalonica were so imminently expecting Jesus to return that they had stopped working and carrying on their daily lives and were simply waiting for Jesus to return.

But of course this wouldn't do Jesus warns them that what is important is what they will be found doing when their Lord returns. We see it here in

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Jesus's warnings in Mark's Gospel and in Paul's letter to the Corinthians we can pick up echoes of another concern the early Christians had. Paul said to them:

*<sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

It was not easy following Jesus in the days of the early Church. They were actively persecuted and lived amongst pagan practices that beckoned them back into their previous ways. But it isn't easy being Christian in today's society either. We may not, in our country, be actively persecuted for our faith, though many around the world are.

But we live in a situation of apathy, where it isn't cool to have a faith and where our society has very different priorities to those of the Christian. To make it even harder two thousand years have now passed and we have almost stopped waiting for Jesus to return. It is not in the forefront of our minds in the way it would have been for the early disciples who would have daily been spurred on by the motivation to be found living diligently for Christ when he returned.

The danger faced by the Christians in Corinth is in many ways a very real problem for us as well. Will we remain firm to the end? Will we continue to faithfully follow Jesus or will we fall by the wayside? Will we be distracted by the cares of life, other things that seem more important than obeying God, temptations in the world around us? Or when he comes will we be ready and waiting? I remember as a student nurse really struggling to stay true to my faith. I loved Jesus and really wanted to obey him but my friends with no faith in God seemed to have so much fun as they did exactly what they pleased. It is only looking back over the years that I see what good choices I made then.

Jesus' instruction to his disciples that they must 'watch' isn't an apocalyptic instruction for the relatively few who faced destruction by the Roman armies but is about the behavior of the whole church that is awaiting the future which God will bring.

Jesus's illustration in our passage of the homeowner returning from a long journey shows us the future is entirely in God's hands and it also suggests that every present moment is transformed and renewed in the light of that future because it becomes the very moment in which God may surprise us by his coming.

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Readiness causes much conflict in my family because there are different people with different understandings of what being ready means. If we make an agreement that we will be leaving for an activity, or sitting down to a meal at a certain time when the time comes my mother, My sister, one of my nieces and I will all be poised and ready to walk out the door or to sit down to our meal. My brother and my other niece will be just beginning to get ready.

And in fact the only way to be ready is to be ready. When I was in Hackney I was part of a major incident response team. So I kept my response bag ready and packed in my study so that when a call came in I could just grab it and go. That wouldn't be the time to start finding what was needed. Being ready is really important

There is nothing wrong with enjoying life, with giving our energies to our families, our jobs, our hobbies. When it becomes wrong is when we forget that there is more to life than these things, when we become too busy with the things of this life to look ahead at what lies beyond.

Jesus warns against this. He tells his followers to be on the alert and pray so that they will have the strength to go through the difficulties that lie ahead of them. He knows that they are facing times of persecution and difficulty. We know that things in this life will only get more difficult as the predictions of wars and famine and earthquake and flood are only too clearly fulfilled in the time we live in. He wants us to go on and live our lives but he wants us to do so in the right way.

He wants us to be:

Obedient – listening to God and obeying him when we hear him speak to us.

Seeking : wanting to know more of God and to be wanting to learn more of him.

Expectant: to expect God to work in our lives and to be ready to work with God

It's not wrong to be involved in this life – we are after all human.

**But** we do need to be aware of the spiritual dimension that can and should affect every part of our lives. The important thing we need to do is to live all of our lives in a way that takes account of God. Not just marginally, not just on Sunday, but in every part of our lives.

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**So for example:**

Is there room in our hearts for God? Do we allow him to inform and direct the way we think and act? Do we love him? Is what he wants important to us?

**Our physical health**

God offers us healing of body, mind and spirit. Do we bring our weaknesses and pain to him for healing and renewal? Are we allowing him to heal us in this life as well as looking forward to wholeness in the next.

**Caring for others**

So many people are lost and damaged. As Christians we have an ideal opportunity to offer them God's healing love. God calls us to be peace makers, building bridges. Are we involved in reconciliation and healing or are we just interested in our own needs?

**Our time**

How do we use our time? Is it taken up by the things that interest us or do we give our time to God. This doesn't simply mean being at church or doing church things. Its easy to be so busy doing things for God that we have little time to spend with God. This time with him is vitally important. Is God involved in our money? Do we pray about how we should spend it? Do we ask him about our weekly giving? When money is tight do we come to him and ask him to supply our needs and to give us wisdom in our spending and saving.

**Do we take time to listen to God in Bible reading and in speaking to him in prayer?**

The Bible tells us what God wants for us. It speaks to our hearts and mind. It has power to change us. Do we use it, cherish it, know it?

We need also to be listening to God and talking to him. Have our minds open to the fact that he might want to communicate with us at any time and listen to what he wants to say to us.

As Paul reminds his readers in Corinth God is faithful and will care for his children. Are we living in his shelter? Does he give us the stability we need in difficult times? Are we looking to him? Is his spirit dwelling in us, empowering us and changing us?

As we look this Advent, towards the coming of Jesus at Christmas are we prepared to meet him? And are we ready and waiting for his return in glory?