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Advent Talk

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen

When do you start preparing for Christmas? Do you look out for presents and cards, etc in the January sales and have it all done by the end of August, or are you desperately going round the supermarket on Christmas Eve looking for last minute presents? Probably most of us are somewhere between the two, and we certainly see Advent Sunday as a marker on the way. In church and outside we tend to think of Advent as the run-up to and part of the story of Jesus' birth in a stable, but actually Advent is also a season of self-examination, like Lent – it's a serious season as our liturgical colour, the colours in our holy table and stoles, change from the red of Christ the King to purple. Having said that, of course the seriousness is leavened by events like concerts, carol services, Christmas-themed events, and Christingles, but still we are encouraged to think not only of Christ coming to us as a baby but also of that moment when we meet Jesus ourselves.

The Matthew passage could be about the second coming, the return of Jesus to earth. This fits in with mention earlier in the chapter of the coming of the son of man 'on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.' We are promised in many parts of scripture that one day, when God remakes the whole world, Jesus will take centre stage. He will appear again and we Christians need to be prepared. There is discussion of two people in a field and two women grinding meal – in each case one disappears. But has the disappearing one gone to heaven and the other been left on earth, or has the disappearing one not gone to heaven but somewhere else, and the other one been left on the new earth? There's a whole series of American books based on the premise that it is non-Christians who are left behind, but perhaps that isn't the case.

Another way of looking at this passage is that it could be about what happens at and after our own death, that we have some sort of encounter with Jesus. In both views, the message is that we should be ready; we should be prepared. We may be around when Jesus returns again to deal with the earth; we will certainly be around for our own death, and we need to be ready for that great step into the unknown. Tom Wright says this is why keeping short accounts with God through regular worship, prayer, reading of the Bible, self-examination, confession, and working on our Christian obedience matters.

There are three stages to this event described in Matthew, whether we are thinking of it as the end of the world or our own mortality. First no-one can tell when it will take place, not even the angels; second life will go on as normal until the last minute as it did for the people of earth at the time of the Flood; and third it will divide people, families, friends, workmates – 'one will be taken and one will be left.' So Jesus is saying to his disciples that whatever happens, they need to be awake and ready.

Jesus knew that his friends' world would be turned upside down in a few years' time by the revolt and crackdown in Jerusalem which led to the destruction of the Temple, death and hardship and people having to flee for their lives. *We* also live in dangerous and turbulent times. Our society and our world is not free of danger as we found in the Covid pandemic, and as we are experiencing now with the climate crisis, and there are many ways for life to end, whether cut short by an accident or the deliberate act of someone else or a decline in the fullness of time through illness or old age. A few years ago the ordinary people of Yemen, Israel, Giza and the West Bank, Sudan, and Ukraine probably thought their lives were just going to continue as they were, and did not know of the horror to come.

So are we ready? As Christians we have committed themselves to walking with Jesus, have said sorry for the things we have done wrong, are trying not to do more things wrong and are saying sorry when we do. Christians want to take time to pray, to study scripture, to have fellowship with other Christians. Christians know what is wrong and what is right and try to live like citizens of God's kingdom. We don't just talk about all these things; we try to do them, to live them, to be ready. We have the encouragement and support of the Bible, of answers to prayer, of our brothers and sisters in Christ; we can do this! And if we are falling a little behind and need to renew our dedication in some way, we should not put off addressing matters but use this Advent to look at ourselves and our relationship with God.

It's not all bad news! If we make sure our lives and our relationships are in order and that our priorities are right, that actually will lead to a happy life. And leading this sort of life and helping others to do so by spreading the world of Christ's love will make a world where the wonderful images in Isaiah 2:2-4 become a reality – all the nations streaming to the house of the Lord together, swords made into ploughshares, spears made into pruning hooks, and no more war, all of us walking in the light of the Lord. We need to do what we can in our own small ways to make this world of peace and love a reality, and then we will be ready for Jesus coming again.

And if we do hear an unexpected knock on the door, there are far worse people to see on the threshold and to welcome in than Jesus, who loves us. So let's accept and enjoy Christ's love and care for us now, work together and individually on our Christian lives, and be ready for when we meet him face to face.

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