

Advent 1 Sunday 27th November

Matthew 24 Signs of the Ends of The Age

‘Unlikely but possible’

ME

Seatbelts

My dad used to put on his seatbelt as we drove off, holding it in his teeth.

When seat belts became compulsory, many people objected arguing for their freedom. Nowadays there’s been a change of heart and many people don’t need the fact that it’s the law to ensure they belt up – the benefit of seatbelts outweighs the slight inconvenience.

We know that a crash is highly unlikely but possible. And because it’s a possibility we prepare for that eventuality, we make our driving ready for an unlikely event.

Is it a bear or a bush?

On a resilience course, it was shown how the pessimist is more likely to succeed in business.

Imagine yourself in the wild and in the distance, you see a dark spot among the scrub – is it a bear or a bush? Well if you assume it’s a bush and it’s a bear you’re in trouble. However, if you prepare for it being a bear and you’re

right, it is a bear, you take precautions to like run like billy-o; or, if it's a bush and you've lost nothing! Is it a bear or a bush – best be ready for it to be a bear!

THEY

Taken away for judgement

In our gospel reading, Matthew likens those who are taken away to those in the days of Noah. Contrary to popular Christian understanding, rather than those taken as the elect going up to heaven, it is those who are taken, the unbelievers who are like those not left in the safety of the ark. They are taken up for judgement. Those left behind are the believers who wait an indeterminate time for the return and rule of Jesus.

Caught up together in the clouds 1 Thess 4:15-18

¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be

caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The disciples probably had in mind ...

that Jesus would return in their lifetimes – this doubtless gave them an impetus to get on with the job. It might also have stimulated the gospels writers to inspire those who had not experienced the return of their messiah within their generation.

End of the world cults

Throughout history, fundamentalist groups and flamboyant characters have predicted and acted upon end of the world predictions – for example David Koresh and the Waco massacre

The impact of end-of-world certainty can lead to horrific outcomes – not just the abandoning of long term projects but in mass suicides.

What historical events might have contributed to apocalyptic expectations?

AD70 destruction of the temple, fall of Rome, Black death, Oliver Cromwell, the holocaust, Donald Trump?

The thrust of Jesus' analogy of the thief is a sense of urgency.

How do we retain a sense of urgency with the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight? If we believe that rather like a burglary or a car accident, it's unlikely yet possible.

It's possible I might have a crash whilst driving, it's possible but unlikely that your house will be burgled tonight. This retains the sense of urgency that Jesus engenders in the illustrations of those harvesting and marrying either in the days of Noah or in Jesus day – and allows for the possibility that it could all be concluded this very night.

Certain biblical events must take place before Jesus can return. If these have not happened, he cannot return. So, it hinges on whether these events have happened or not.

Apocalyptic event	Possible	Unlikely
A. Preaching the gospel to all nations	Colossians 1:23 Gospel preached to every creature in a representative way to whole world	Many language groups and tribes not heard
B. Great tribulation	e.g. AD66-70 or C20th persecution of Christians in USSR, communist China and Muslim countries	Jesus words suggest even greater suffering
C. False Christ and false prophets	Plenty of witchcraft and demonic activity bringing about sign and wonders since Pharaoh Ex 7:11 to Acts 8:9	Jesus' prediction indicates even worse more prevalent
D. Powerful signs in the heavens	Eclipses more likely that Isaiah 13:10 and Mt	Very very unlikely Mt 24:29

	24:29 point to cosmic destruction after second coming	NB Could happen within a few minutes
E. Appearance of the man of lawlessness	Nero, other Roman emperors like Domitian, Stalin, Hitler, Pope	Expect to be much worse than these – Trump?!
F. The Salvation of Israel	Paul’s conversion could have instigated his ingathering of the Jews in the first century	Romans 9-11 massive ingathering of the Jews

US

Black Friday

Brexit – we weren’t exactly prepared as a nation , Trunp – how ready is the Us to accept their new president or to understand the impact.

US can no longer wait for Black Friday – it’s crept into Thanksgiving – waiting we’re not very good at it, are we? Blackout on Oxford Street – apocalyptic, just a sense of

fun apparently, of magic – what was that? People aren't waiting anymore for the second coming

Lock the house at night? Unlikely but possible

What if you were certain – what steps would you take?

What if Jesus were definitely coming

on 17th December – how would your preparations for Christmas look? What would you do differently – what habits might you adopt or drop?

And if you knew for certain Jesus wasn't coming for centuries...

What's wrong with slacking off?

It belies a failure to understand what God has given – freedom through faith by grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus. 'A license to sin', some have called Christianity – this fails to appreciate that the repentant heart is not a heart that is perfect, not at all – rather the repentant heart is one that has turned and is turning to serve Christ, certainly not a completed work but a work in progress. The desire to become Christ-like brings about transformation and no rules no strict regulations no bit in the teeth of the horse I needed.

The wisdom of seatbelts

Once people see the wisdom of seatbelts they don't need the law to ensure they comply. Sadly, the use of mobiles while driving has still to bring about a change of heart despite numerous incidents of fatal crashes.

My brother works in forensics and regularly visits burgled house where people have left their wallets and car keys in plain sight downstairs and made it very easy to have their cards stolen – do I still do that yes – have I ever been burgled – no.

Being burgled remains possible but unlikely – we still prepare our houses for the night time by bolting the door, perhaps even setting an alarm. The Rectory was broken into numerous times during Richard Heading's day – thankfully it hasn't happened yet to me but I notice that the alarm is always activated when I leave the house!

What of your own spiritual house – what state is it in? What parts of the house have we left exposed to the corruption and temptation of the world? Perhaps even now, the life God wants for you, to live it to the fullest is being marred or damaged or burgled because we're not prepared for the onslaught or craftiness of evil one.

What could we do to put our house in order in the unlikely but possible event that Jesus will return on 17th Dec at 3pm?

Why would we not want to put our house in order anyway?

Notes

No doubt of Christ's return – every knee will bow, coming on the louds of heaven v30

Only God knows not even Jesus

Benjamin's teething – this must happen but he doesn't know why and the pain can't be taken away.

D Trump – God allows rulers and leaders as a mark of his love and grace to let freewill and self-determination have its way for now even to let democracy go its own dysfunctional way – its possibly the best system in the absence of a God-fearing world. Maybe intolerance itself will become intolerable globally thus

Fidel Castro – Good education and welfare. Who knows how God intervened to prevent the missile crisis in the early 1960s from escalating into full scale nuclear war?

What lies does the devil persuade us to live the world's way not God's? Popularity, to avoid persecution, we might gain the world and forfeit our soul that way

The lack of readiness of the flood in Noah's day ended up being fatal.

This generation ...v34 can be translated as 'race' which makes a lot more sense otherwise Jesus' words did not come true.

Questions:

1. How does it impact you knowing that Jesus could return at any time?
2. Why did Jesus leave the disciples to get on with the job without him?
3. Do you long for Jesus' return? If not, why not?
4. Have you ever felt it's not worth committing to a long-term project – what are the negative consequences of that line of argument?
5. What difference Christ's returning on Dec 17th at 3pm – what might you attempt to resolve – what aspects of your life might you want to address and why?

Immediate gratification pressure of mindset from post-truth society – electoral banter – the new way to describe lying.

Advent – the appearance 'phanos' of God – at Christmas is mystery, at second coming is majesty, pre-nativity is history.

Christmas talk – history, mystery, majesty.....

In the meantime,....

While I'm not sure this is exactly what Matthew had in mind when he wrote this passage, I do think one of the chief reasons Christians gather is to encourage each other and help each other to see God, especially during dark and difficult times. Keep in mind that's why Matthew and the other Evangelists wrote in the first place! A millennium and a half later, Martin Luther would say something quite similar when he described the church as the place where you could count on the mutual comfort and consolation of the faithful. And that tradition continues every time we meet.

Sleeper's awake – how can we help one another see God at work today? How to help each other watch and wait [Fear of judgement day](#)
used by religions as a controlling the masses lever –
[how could judgement signify good news?](#)