

Year A

Matthew 24:36-44

Back on 1st August this year the Daily Mail newspaper printed the following.

“There may still be 146 sleeps to go until Christmas, but that hasn't stopped Selfridges from launching its festive range a staggering four months early.

The London department store officially threw open the doors to its winter wonderland today, which comprises 3,000 square feet, 50,000 decorations and countless strings of fairy lights.

This year's theme is 'shine on', with everything from neon-hued Christmas trees to multicoloured baubles and ornate tinsel wreaths on offer at the Oxford Street shopping destination. The cheapest items are small ornaments like baubles, while you can splash out on a 7.5ft pre-lit Nordic spruce tree if you have a spare £800 burning a hole in your pocket. The launch of Selfridges' now-famous winter wonderland comes 146 days before Christmas, while most of Britain is enjoying the summer holidays - but will further 'expand' in the autumn. It claims to be the world's earliest

Christmas store of its kind, with store bosses saying they open early in order to accommodate tourists.”¹

That’s some excuse, eh? But you know it highlights a problem that most of us will have today. We are mentally in Christmas mode already. This is the beginning of Advent; not Christmas! The two are not the same thing, neither is Advent a gentle introduction to Christmas. The feeling of dread that may accompany the Gospel reading today should warn us about that.

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3718027/Selfridges-opens-Christmas-shop-London-FOUR-months-early.html>

We must not fall into the trap of rushing on ahead to the shepherds, angels, manger and all the rest. For this season of Advent, is the season of waiting. If we do not learn to stop and wait, we cannot be prepared for the celebration to come. Both Advent and Lent, sharing the liturgical colour of purple, have the same function of attentive, waiting; the former for the incarnation and the latter for the resurrection. If we rush, we will miss the significance and we will find ourselves somewhat disorientated and out of kilter.

Traditional Advent Sunday majors on the theme of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

It is not so much about looking back but instead about looking forward. So we have this ominous, somewhat frightening text in Matthew's Gospel. However, for me, there is a significant problem. I do believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ. I do believe that he will appear again on earth as undeniably the King of all before him: hence the celebration last Sunday. However, I do not believe that the text in Matthew's Gospel refers to that particular event. We can become so used to reading it as a description of the second coming that we cannot conceive of it in any other way. There is a

particular branch of Christianity, particularly popular within the United States of America, which teaches a rapture theology, of people being taken to glory while others are left standing. And of course this passage in Matthew's Gospel is cited as a proof text for that particular view. However the problem with this is obvious and it's found in verse 34. We read there Jesus' words; "truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place". Jesus has given a particular time limit to the events he was describing. Yes indeed, the events may have originally

been understood as referring to the end of the world but only if the world were to end within a small number of years. That has not happened therefore Jesus must have been describing something else: but what? What would the Son of Man be coming to in judgement? Well, history tells us. In the year AD70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, bringing to an end Judaism as everyone had known it to that point in time. It was a truly cataclysmic event that had a devastating impact on all who lived through it. Some were indeed taken while others remained, but not to glory, instead to

death in the terrible events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem.

Now, in saying all of that, it is important to acknowledge that this passage of Scripture reaches forward to us in our generation with power and relevance. The Fall of Jerusalem was long ago but the reign of Christ and his arrival as King on earth has still to take place. Therefore we are people who live between the times: between the ascension and the upheaval that followed that and the parousia, his coming again. We must learn to wait and in waiting to decide how to live.

Will we live in apathy or anxiety or will we live in faith and hope?

G. Campbell Morgan once preached:

“Waiting for God is not laziness. Waiting for God is not going to sleep. Waiting for God is not the abandonment of effort. Waiting for God means first activity under command; second, readiness for any new command that may come; third, the ability to do nothing until the command is given.”²

Unfortunately, it is all too evident that the church has not discovered this or if it has it has chosen not to live it. That is why the

² <http://www.biblebaptistelmont.org/BBC/library/Morgan/secret.html>

season of Advent is so important in its own right. Judgement is at the heart of the Gospel text today. But we must remember that these words come from the lips of the judge who has already been judged on our behalf. As this passage addresses us living between the times so we find Jesus whatever way we turn: past, present or future. He is sovereign over all history and so we must not allow anxiety and fear to elbow their way forward but instead we must see all things through him who is the King, the Judge and the Judged.

Confused???? Well, hopefully not, although these things are not easy for us. We must never fall into the trap of assuming that we have it all sewn up; that we've worked it out and now we can rest content. No, we are not expected to know everything, but we are expected to do something. We are expected to keep awake. If we keep awake then we are prepared and ready.

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), Annie Dillard reveals a sad, but poignant story about what happens when we set out unprepared. She tells of a British Arctic expedition which set

sail in 1845 to chart the Northwest Passage around the Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. Neither of the two ships and none of the 138 men aboard returned.

Captain Sir John Franklin prepared as if they were embarking on a pleasure cruise rather than an arduous and gruelling journey through one of earth's most hostile environments. He packed a 1,200 volume library, a hand-organ, china place settings for officers and men, cut-glass wine goblets and sterling silver flatware, beautifully and intricately designed. Years later, some of

these place settings would be found near a clump of frozen, cannibalised bodies.

The voyage was doomed when the ships sailed into freezing waters and became trapped in ice. First ice coated the decks, the spars and the rigging. Then water froze around the rudders and the ships became hopelessly locked in the now-frozen sea. Sailors set out to search for help, but soon succumbed to severe Arctic weather and died of exposure to its harsh winds and sub-freezing temperatures. For some twenty years, remains of the expeditions were found all over the frozen landscape.

The crew did not prepare either for the cold or for the eventuality of the ships becoming ice-locked. On a voyage which was to last two to three years, they packed only their Navy-issue uniforms and the captain carried just a 12-day supply of coal for the auxiliary steam engines. The frozen body of an officer was eventually found, miles from the vessel, wearing his uniform of fine blue cloth, edged with silk braid, a blue greatcoat and a silk neckerchief — clothing which was noble and respectful, but wholly inadequate.

This is what Jesus is warning us about. This remains the challenge of the Advent

season. We cannot have all that we desire now. We have to wait. We have to learn to wait, well prepared for all that is to come.