

Thought for the Week 29th November 2020 Advent Sunday

Mark 13: 1-11 & 21-33

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

² “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

⁵ Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

⁹ “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. ¹¹ Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

¹ At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. ²² For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²³ So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

²⁴ “But in those days, following that distress,

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;

²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”^[d]

²⁶ “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it^[d] is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert^[e]! You do not know when that time will come.

Have you ever found yourself on the edge of your seat when you were watching a film? Or in a close-fought rugby match when someone might be about to score a try or a goal. Tension is a powerful force, isn't it? It moves stories forward, making us want to keep turning the pages of the book, or keeping our eyes glued to a film in suspense. Tension is also powerful in creating physical movement - think about a bow and arrow. It is no use having a loose, relaxed bow string; you need the tension to make the arrow

fly. Or think about the strings of a guitar, or the skin on a drum. The strings or the skin have to be held in tension to create a resonant sound.

The problem is, often tensions are uncomfortable. If we know two people are having an argument with differing points of view, we will say that we can feel the tension in the room. Tension asks us to hold in balance two things which seem to be opposing each other, and that can be a challenge. This is often true when we try and wrestle with some of the big questions of the Christian faith. Is God our friend, or is he our judge? Is God close to us, or holy and other? Is God in charge, or do we have free will? When questions like this get too much for us, we often just give up and collapse the tension, rather than try to wrestle with the apparent contradictions and to find creative power in the midst of them.

First Coming And Second Coming

Today we begin the season of Advent which means “coming”. The “coming” of Jesus refers to his first coming as a baby 2000 years ago. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus kicked-off the Kingdom of God on earth. This was the beginning of the kingly rule and reign of God which had been long promised by the prophets. It might have looked very different to what people had expected, but it made a transforming difference in the lives of everyone who responded to it.

At the same time, the fullness of Jesus’ Kingdom won’t be complete until he comes again. As well as the first coming of Jesus as a human baby, there is also a second Advent, a “second coming” of Jesus. This is a clear expectation which the New Testament church had: that Jesus would come again. Jesus himself speaks of:

“the Son of Man coming in clouds ‘with great power and glory.’” (Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27)

Or take for example this passage from Hebrews:

“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:28)

After Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension back to his Father’s side, the angels explain to the disciples:

“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

This belief in the return of Jesus shapes the whole of the New Testament understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and how we are to live in the world as we anticipate it.

Knowing What Time It Is

When Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 13 he encourages them and us to be aware of the “time” we live in:

“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.” (Romans 13:11-12)

Imagine that you wake up early the day of a great party - it could be a birthday, a wedding, or Christmas day. The night before is almost over, the sun is just beginning to come up. You’re full of excitement - and yet the party itself has not yet started. In this situation, you begin to live with both the anticipation of the day being almost here and the frustration that it has not yet fully begun. You would begin to put on your

party clothes and do all you could to make final preparations. But you would hold that in tension with knowing that the party in all its fullness was still a few hours away.

This is the “time” we live in as Christians. The night is almost gone and the day of Jesus’ Kingdom has started to dawn. And yet, that Kingdom “day” has not yet arrived in all its fullness. We live with the suspense that the full party has not yet started. Paul tells us to be aware that we are living in this “time”, this in-between daybreak stage.

This is a huge tension in the Christian life, sometimes called the “now and not yet” of the Kingdom:

“Now” Jesus is King, and at the same time his Kingdom is “not yet” here in its fullness.

“Now” Satan is defeated, and at the same time we are waiting for all evil to be finally overcome and so our lives are “not yet” free from temptation.

“Now” Jesus has healed the sick and has given us authority to do the same in his name, and at the same time we live in an era where sick people are “not yet” healed.

“Now” Jesus is resurrected from the dead and we are seated with him in the heavenly places, and at the same time we live in the “not yet” where all creation groans to be healed and resurrected.

This “now” and “not yet” calls us to a radical form of living. It asks us to be both hope-filled and also realistic. Life is not all roses and sunshine this side of Jesus’ second coming. We all struggle with pain, temptation, disappointment and loss, and, of course, all the effects of Coronavirus. The earth continues to groan, the oppressed continue to cry “How long?” And yet in the middle of these challenging realities we have seen the sun beginning to rise and we are called to live in its light.

How Then Do We Live?

Paul continues the passage we just read with this exhortation:

“So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Romans 13:12-14)

When we know a party is coming, we need to put on our party clothes and prepare all we can for the coming celebration. Similarly, when we know Jesus is coming, we need to put on our “Jesus clothes.” What are they, you might ask? I don’t mean grow your hair and beard long and put on a long brown robe. Our “Jesus clothes” are for example the Armour of God (Eph 6) and attitudes like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:12). Jesus reminds his disciples that nobody knows the time of his return, and that we should:

“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:34-36)

In this passage and in many of his parables Jesus asks us to live in a holy suspense - ready for his return. Why not use the time we have during this Advent season to reflect about whether or not you are living a life which anticipates God’s eternity and celebrates what is best for you, for the people around you, and the world which God has made.



At Home for Christmas?

MODERATOR'S WEEKEND OF PRAYER
27-29 NOVEMBER 2020

We have been through some testing times in 2020. Sometimes, it has felt like a battle. As the weeks have extended into months of lockdown (with other restrictions), we may have been wondering it would ever end. Will things ever get back to the way they were?

We can give no guarantees about the future. We are after all, “aliens and strangers” here just passing through (Hebrews 11:13), and our true and ultimate home is in heaven. That said, it is important for us to be fully invested in the challenge of living well in a world which is deeply broken, tainted by sin and “groaning” with the in-built tensions of being out of step with God. (Romans 8:22)

So, as we prepare to pray at various points through the weekend of 27-29 November 2020, we will do what Paul taught us to do in Ephesians 6:18. “Pray, in the Spirit, on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.”

Covid-19 at home

- Pray for healthcare staff in Hospitals across Ireland, that God would give new reserves of strength for each day.
- Pray especially for frontline staff working in units set up to care for Covid-19 patients that God would grant them safety and success in their work.
- Pray for hospital administrators who face the seemingly impossible task of prioritising the availability of beds, asking God for wisdom and peace of heart in crucial decision making.
- Pray for Healthcare chaplains who have been working steadily for the past nine months with this new reality, asking God to help them sensitively take opportunities to share his love.
- Pray for people you know, including families, who have been directly affected by illness caused by Covid-19, asking God to give grace and bring healing.

Brexit

- It is still not clear what the final outcome of the negotiations between the UK, Ireland and the European Union will be. Pray that, as the date for transition approaches at the end of December, there will be clarity on policies to follow, and their implications.
- Pray for owners of businesses and their staff who are concerned about the impact of Brexit on the life and work, asking God to help them to prepare and provide in a time of uncertainty.
- Pray for stability in the community in Northern Ireland, especially asking God that the good work done in building improved community relations over the past 20 years would be able to continue.

Pastoral needs locally

- Pray for families who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 or related health conditions. Especially ask God to lead and care for them as their process of grieving has been made much more difficult by the restrictions surrounding funerals.
- Pray for PCI ministers who are seeking to be attentive pastors to their people, yet are prevented from visiting in homes. Ask God to help them find simple ways to connect, give listening hearts and find ways to bring his Word to bear on real situations.
- Pray for congregations who are seeking to find new and imaginative ways to care for people who are lonely, isolated or fearful. Pray that a ministry of presence in person or at a distance might prove powerful.
- Thank God for technology like the phone, Zoom, and other means of keeping in touch.
- Pray for schools, teachers and pupils, facing uncertainty about exams and the pattern of the academic year in 2021. Ask God to help all to continue to find motivation despite the unknowns.