

LUKE 21:25-36
STAND UP FOR JESUS

What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for something important to happen? For some of us, we are waiting for important events in our lives; maybe you're feeling that nothing important happens to you now, and you just muddle on! Waiting is a curious time: you know something is coming, but it's not here yet. We have lots of choices about how we wait, but let me offer your two choices: first, we ignore it and get on with life; whatever we're waiting for will happen when it happens, till then just ignore it and everything about it and do nothing to prepare for it. Or secondly, we worry about it constantly: it takes up every waking moment of our lives with anxiety for what is to come; of course, worry doesn't make it come any faster; worry doesn't change the event for which waiting, but it dominates every minute of every day. The best way of waiting is somewhere in between: we prepare as best we can for what is coming, and make sure that everything we can do is done and then we simply wait patiently – which, of course is much easier said than done.

Advent is waiting time. This is the first Sunday in Advent, and we have lit our first Advent candle; maybe you have opened the first two doors of your Advent calendars already. Advent is waiting time as it points us to something yet to happen, in our case that is Christmas with our celebration of the coming of Jesus. Advent's waiting reflects Mary's waiting to give birth to her baby; it reflects Joseph's waiting for his wife's baby to be born, waiting that would be complicated by the order that he needs to take her to Bethlehem for the census, and they have to factor in a difficult journey that they could well do without given their circumstances. Our Christmas carols might give a sense of the world holding its breath waiting for the Messiah, but the reality is that the rest of world was going about its business regardless. For some, there was a hope in their hearts that God would do something like this at some time but there was nothing to say "now is the time; here is the place!" There was nothing in the air beforehand to suggest that now would be the special moment! When Jesus came, some saw!

Today's reading is not about that waiting time, but about the other waiting time of Advent, the waiting time around Jesus' coming for the second time. This was a conversation that began with the chat about the temple and how the temple would be destroyed, and we talked about that a couple of weeks ago from Mark 13. Jesus paints a picture of what that time will be like and how there will be all kinds of troubles in the world; this is what the world is like and will be like, He says. If we had some idea that the world was going to be a perfect place because Jesus had been here, then think again. But there will be a hinge moment in the history of the world and that hinge moment is something that we need to know about. This is something more that God will do, and the early Christians believed keenly that God would do this and thought it would happen within a matter of years. Some were disappointed when it didn't happen quite as they expected. This is a hinge moment in the history of the world that is yet to come.

"At that..." (Luke 21:27) This is the hinge moment in the history of the world. This is the other theme of Advent for the Christian, waiting for Jesus to come again to the world, coming with glory and great power. His second coming will not be in an out-of-way place like Bethlehem; it will be a world-wide event for everyone to see. It will not be the coming of a helpless baby but the coming of a great King in power to judge the world. Lots of people will tell you when this is going to happen and will tell you "here are the signs" but Jesus does neither of these things. He tells us that only the Father knows when, and the signs He gives us are signs of the age; this is what the world is and will be like, not a countdown to His second coming. The bigger issue for us is having this event on our radar at all: we may be vaguely aware of this idea, but we're certainly not "waiting" for it. It may be a vague hope in our hearts, but has it any impact on the way we think or believe? Should it? Here is the hinge moment in the history of the universe.

“When these...” (Luke 21:28) Redemption is a fine Bible word; it has a quite specific meaning. It is all about setting someone free at the payment of a price. Someone is taken hostage; a ransom is demanded for their release and when that ransom is paid, the hostage is redeemed, is set free because the price has been paid. In Jesus’ world, it was used of slaves being set free: slaves were property, people owned them, but there were times when they were set free because they paid the price to their masters – redemption! The word is used of us and Jesus in the gospel: we are slaves to sin; sinners are slaves; that is true of all of us, like it or not. Jesus has paid the ransom price – *“For even...” (Mark 10:45)* so that when He died on the cross, He was the ransom for us, set free from sin by being forgiven, set free from the power of sin to control us by the power of Jesus in us enabling us to live a new life. So we are redeemed; redemption is ours; we are free!

But there is a part of that story still to be completed. A church leader was travelling on a train and a very enthusiastic young Christian came to join him at his table: he asked our church leader “are you saved?” to which our leader replied, “I have been saved; I am being saved; I will be saved!” It is this “will be” that Jesus talks about here: *“Your redemption...” (Luke 21:28)* We are set free by God’s forgiveness and nothing can take that away from us; we are free people, no longer held bound by our sin. But we are not yet perfect people: we still struggle with sin in us, thinking wrong things, saying wrong things, behaving badly; that battle still goes on in my heart and head if not in yours! One day, this work of redemption will be complete, and we will be perfect people and the world will be a perfect place; that will happen when Jesus comes. Then our redemption will be completed; the work begun on cross will be totally finished in us and in the world when Jesus comes.

Advent and a baby – we give that story a kind of glow! There are lots of pictures of “baby Jesus” and Mary have this holy glow around them, a halo, as if to suggest that they come from a world or a time when everything was perfect, and life was perfect peace. So, we struggle to see how this touches the world we live in because our world is not like that. It is the same with the second coming: surely Jesus will come when the world is a perfect place, full of peace, God preparing the world for His Son, the King. But that is not what Jesus says: *“Look at...” (Luke 21:30f)* He has described a world in which people are disturbed by what they see, people are in anguish and perplexity, are fainting in terror at world events around them. These are the leaves sprouting on the fig tree that show the world that the kingdom of God is near; it is in this kind of world that the kingdom of God is born in the hearts and minds of people who believe in Jesus. God’s kingdom doesn’t come from some pink-cloud kind of world, but comes in the midst of our messy, dirty world. That is where God is to be found in the gospel.

“When these...” (Luke 21:28) When the world was about to celebrate the turn of the Millennium, some people decided this was a hinge moment in the world’s life, so they began to stockpile food and other things; they thought that the world was about to crash, planes would fall out of the sky and computers would stop working at midnight; so they stockpiled food and went off to live in the mountains, in caves and other hideaways, afraid of what might happen next. This hinge moment in the world, when Jesus comes again, how are we to wait? Are we to forget about it and ignore it and don’t bother thinking or preparing for it? Or are we letting it dominate our minds so that we become anxious and frightened? *“Stand and lift up your heads”* – what kind of body language does that suggest? Let’s say “Quiet confidence!” Stand up for Jesus by keeping the faith, not giving up; stand up for Jesus with our heads held high to say we are right to keep faith no matter what!

It is really hard to stand up and hold our heads high! There are so many things that get in the way and pull us down. How can I hold my head high when people tell me that my faith is irrelevant to the world that we live in? How can I hold my head high when the world is suffering and people are in pain? How can I hold my head high when my fellow-Christians snipe at me and criticise me for things I do which they think are wrong-headed? How can I hold my head high when people who are supposed to love me nose into my business so that they can gossip

about me and share my story without my permission? How can I hold my head high when... and you can add other things to that! Standing is about holding on to our faith; standing is about doing the good that we do and keeping doing good; standing is about loving other people, even those who are unlovable, and keeping on loving and caring; standing is about following Jesus and still following Jesus no matter what! This is hard, but well worth it; God is our glory and the lifter of our heads; He is our confidence and our strength.

Jesus is King in our world. The kingdom of God is born and lives and grows in our kind of world. The kingdom of God is born, lives and grows in people who believe in Lord Jesus and who look to follow Him. The kingdom of God lives in us and produces in us hope and expectation. So, we wait for Jesus to come again to the world: we wait in anticipation because He promises us a new heaven and new earth and perfect peace; we wait in trepidation because Jesus is coming to judge the earth and all people everywhere; we wait in hope that we shall share in Jesus' glory and be with Him forever. Advent is waiting time: are we waiting for presents? Are we waiting for Christmas lunch? Are we waiting for family to come home? Are we waiting for carols to sing? Are we waiting for a baby to be born? Are we waiting for Jesus, waiting to celebrate the Saviour's coming into the world so that we can renew our faith? Are we waiting for the Saviour to come again to the world so that our redemption will be complete? What are you waiting for? Where does your faith fit into that waiting?