

MATTHEW 24:36-44
SHAKEN AND STIRRED

Are you a patient person? How well do you wait? Some people just have no patience whatsoever; they want everything to happen now! To be fair, we live in a world where most things happen instantly, but there are still times when we have to wait. We're waiting for a train – but we complain that it is late, there are leaves on the line, or the wrong kind of snow! We're waiting for Christmas or birthdays – when you're a child, these never seemed to come, and you're always waiting and now when you're older, they come far too quickly. We're waiting for a baby to be born and there's a whole lot of conflicting issues there, depending on whether you are mum, dad, the grandparents or big sister. But there is nothing you can do: being impatient is not going to make the train appear more quickly. Some of us are quite laid back about these things: "they'll happen when they happen!" If you're like that, you drive impatient people mad because they wish you'd get worked up; but secretly they also wish that they could be like that too! Impatiently waiting uses up so much energy!

Advent is a season for waiting. We're waiting to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world and we're building up the season to Christmas. But today we're thinking about the other kind of Advent waiting, because Jesus has promised that He will come again to the world. If we're honest, for most of us this promise is just not on our radar. We recite it in the creed: "He will come to judge the living and the dead", but as a feature of Christian faith, for most of us it doesn't register much, if at all. So we can hardly say that we are really waiting for Jesus; but we should be! It should be on our radar; it is precisely to people who don't remember, that Jesus words are addressed; it is people like us that Jesus stirs and shakes in Matthew 24.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would return to the world. When He comes for the second time, it will not be in a quiet corner, as a baby; but it will be a world-wide experience that no-one can miss. The early church lived with that promise and waited... and waited. There were two dangers: first, they waited and gave up everything else to wait; do you remember the approach to the year 2000 and people hid in caves and stock-piled food because they thought the world would end or the Millennium Bug would kill planes and trains; life stopped while they waited; they withdrew from life to wait. Some early Christians did that too and of course Jesus didn't come as they had expected. Secondly, they gave up waiting because the promise hadn't happened and some gave up faith because Jesus hadn't come; they grew impatient with the promise and the fact that it hadn't happened and their impatience won the day and they gave up waiting. Let's listen to Jesus to see what He has to say to us.

Matthew 24 is all about signs of the end of the age and of Jesus' coming. "*Tell us*" the disciples said. "*At that...*" (*Matthew 24:30*) There you have it! From the mouth of Jesus Himself, a promise that He will come "*With power and great glory*" and the earth will be shaken and stirred by His coming. Ever since Jesus made that promise, there have been people predicting when it would happen; "the end of the world is near" and they dare to go into the streets with placards to tell the world. Some have predicted that it would end at such and such a time, on this particular date and "you better get ready". Of course, they have all been proved wrong, but it hasn't stopped people making these predictions. Because people make these predictions and are wrong, we tend to dismiss the whole idea as being as wacky as those who wear the placards; but that would be a mistake!

"*No one...*" (*Matthew 24:36*) Is there anything Jesus doesn't know? Now, there's an idea we don't like too much; the idea of something that Jesus doesn't know. We like to think that Jesus knows everything and sees everything. But here is one thing that He admits to not knowing, the time of His second coming. We don't like idea of unpredictability; it makes us nervous. We want to know; we want to have some control over events; we want to be able to plan ahead. But not even Jesus knows! Does that mean it won't happen? Again, it would be a mistake to think like that!

There are three pictures that Jesus paints to warn of the dangers of this unpredictability and the danger of us going to sleep over this promise. The first is the story of Noah: Noah was warned by God about the flood and so he built the ark to save himself, his family and the animals. Having been warned by God of what is to come, Noah passed on that warning to his friends, to the people around him, but they laughed at him, and they totally disregarded his warnings; they carried on doing what they always did. They cooked, went to work, went shopping, got married – all the things of normal life carried on regardless and they simply ignored Noah. We now know that was a mistake! God was right. Noah was right. The flood came and Noah and his family were saved, but none of the others!

The second picture is all about normal life. Two men are working in the fields, doing the normal day jobs, ploughing, sowing seed, hoeing up weeds, feeding animals – one will be “taken” to be with Jesus; the second will be left. Two women are going about their normal daily business of grinding corn and one will be taken and the other left. These pictures leave so many questions unanswered, but their whole point is that Jesus’ coming is unpredictable and sudden.

Finally, we have the picture of the man who wants to break into your house. Does he send a note round 2 weeks before saying “I’m going to break into your house on the 23rd”? Of course, he doesn’t. *“If the...” (Matthew 24:43)* It is unpredictable. It happens when we’re not watching; it happens in the middle of the night when we’re asleep. It happens when we’re away from home and the house is empty.

“Therefore keep...” (Matthew 24:42,44) Keep watch means two things. Firstly, keeping watch means to wait patiently, believing the promise. Rediscover Jesus’ promise to come again to the world; the promise hasn’t gone away; it is still there and it will always be there till the day He comes. Rediscover the promise and put it on your radar as part of your Christian faith. Wait patiently for Jesus to make that promise come true. We can’t try to work out when; that’s just a waste of time and energy, but we can wait patiently, believing in our hearts that it will happen one day. Waiting patiently is not about retiring from the world to go hide in a cave, but is about living a normal life with this promise in our hearts. Jesus gave His disciples these words to help them persevere in their faith and to warn them not to give up believing, not to give up waiting, not to give up watching! Keep watch means believing the promise and continuing to believe the promise.

Secondly, keeping watch means living our lives in the right way. In Romans 13, Paul reflects a little on this promise and what impact it should make on the way we live. He urges the Christians to wake up; they are dozing off and they are forgetting what is important. They are taking on things that they should not be taking on, engaging in lifestyles that Christians should not engage in. *“Wake up!” “Rather...” (Romans 13:14)* Put on Jesus! Model yourself on Jesus! What do we see in Jesus? What is good about the way in which He lives? What is good about the things He teaches? Put all of that on like a brand new set of clothes; learn to be like Jesus and learn to live for Him. *“Where are the transformed lives, the renewed relationships, my new community?” (Andy Bathgate)* Jesus is quite entitled to ask that question when He comes; keeping watch is about making sure our lives are being transformed to be more and more like Jesus, that our relationships are loving to reflect Jesus’ love for us; and that we are making new communities of faith and hope and love in church and beyond. Keeping watch is about way we live!

Someone was visiting a large country house; he was a tourist and he has walked round the house and now he was walking round the gardens and was very impressed by way they were being looked after. As part of the tour, he’d learned that the owner of the house and estate was away from home and had been for some months. As he walked round the gardens, he saw that they were well-tended, not a weed in sight; the roses are in full bloom and had been

carefully pruned; the borders were neat and tidy, all dead-headed. Then he saw the gardener working in one of the beds and he went over to speak to him, wanting to congratulate him! He told him how impressed he was with the state of the gardens, especially since the owner was away! He said to the gardener "you must expect him back tomorrow!" The gardener replied "no sir, not tomorrow; I expect him back today!" The garden was kept neat and tidy in expectation of the master's return.

"Keep watch" (Matthew 24:42) This is not the easiest promise to deal with. Do we believe it? 2000 years have passed and there is no sign yet! It is hard to keep believing. But that's just Jesus' warning: "it is so easy to go to sleep with this promise, but that would be a mistake!" Keep watch: wait patiently, believing the promise. Keep watch: live life for Jesus and keep living life for Jesus. This is a promise to shake and stir: to shake us from our sleep and to stir us into action: wait patiently and keep believing; wait patiently and live our lives for Jesus. Be shaken and stirred this advent; it's what Jesus wants of us.