

MATTHEW 24:36-44
THE BIGGER PICTURE

Have you ever been to the first night of a play, its premiere? I've not been to a play, but I have been to the premiere of a piece of new music. The first night should be exciting, but it may also be a bit risky, watching the first time something has been performed in public, with everybody a bit nervous about it, perhaps none more so than author of piece. How will the cast perform it? Will they get it right? Will they do the text justice, with the right words and the right tone? How will the audience receive it? Will they like it? Will you tell by the warmth of the applause how it went down? I'm told that at the end of a play, on the first night, there is a tradition that the author of the work comes onto the stage to receive the applause of the audience and be celebrated as the author of the work. The piece of new music that we heard was greeted with muted applause, but no composer appeared!

Bruce Milne suggests that Jesus' second coming is like the "curtain closing on the stage of time" The author of time and history comes onto the stage to receive the "applause" of His people! Or: "life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" – Shakespeare gives these words to Macbeth as he considers what his life has been like, just before he dies at the end of the play. But is this what life and history is really like? If life is as empty as that, if the history of the world, or our stories are simply "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" then we have little hope. But Jesus' view of history is very different: history has a beginning and an end; history is moving steadily to a day when Jesus returns to wind it all up, the author of time and history coming onto the stage to receive glory as the King of heaven and earth forever. We are working to that day, a great and glorious day. That is the bigger picture that Jesus sees!

Jesus knows that bigger picture; He promises that He will come again to the world and that the world as we know it will end and will be remade, a new heaven and a new earth. The only part of that story that Jesus didn't know was "when!" "*No-one knows...*" (*Matthew 24:36*) Jesus doesn't know and He tells us that He doesn't know; only the Father knows! Yet, perversely, we want to know when! We even predict when! How many times has someone predicted the end of the world; "the end of the world is nigh!" say the sandwich boards that people used to wear! Some have even made very detailed predictions and told us exactly when the world will end: the years 1000 and 2000 have stimulated so much of this kind of prediction; someone else predicted the year 1260; yet another told us that the world will end at 8am on 19th October 1553. The whole prediction business is quite useless; believe none of it! Jesus didn't know, so how can we work it out!

Matthew 24 is about two things: it is about the end of the world promises, Jesus' second coming and such like; it is also about the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, when the city would be destroyed; the second of these took place in AD70. It is sometimes hard for us to separate out these two threads and sometimes they get twisted together and it almost seems impossible to untangle them. We need to try! Some early Christians thought that these two events were so linked together that when one happened, the other would follow right behind, but of course that wasn't the case; so they questioned Jesus' promise. Some said the Lord had come but we missed it; others said that He had made a mistake and it was all about Jerusalem being destroyed and so let's reinterpret Jesus' words; others kept faith with Jesus' promise and lived by faith and lived with hope in their hearts that Jesus will come again to the world, though we know not when. That faith and that hope we have inherited and is the flame we try to keep alive.

"*At that...*" (*Matthew 24:30f*) This is the promise! Jesus is talking about Himself. This is a very different picture from Christmas, with stables and angels and stars and shepherds and wise men, and a baby born to save world. It is a strange way to save the world, but this is what God did to complete the promises He had made hundreds of years before. We celebrate this

coming. But we now have a new set of promises, this time made by Jesus Himself, that He will come to the world for a second time, this time “*on clouds of glory*” for the whole world to see, an unmissable event, an unmakeable event, “*with power and great glory*”. As God kept one set of promises, so we believe and hope that He will keep the second set and that Jesus will come again and set the world to rights and create a new heaven and a new earth and there will be nothing to disturb us; all will be perfect peace and light!

The picture that Jesus uses is one that is all about not knowing and surprise! “*Understand this...*” (*Matthew 24:43*) Our house was broken into in 2004, in the morning, when there was no-one at home; a laptop, a camera, the car keys and the car were stolen; the thief got into the house by throwing a rock through the patio door. He was caught in Lothian Road, in the early hours of the next morning driving the car with false number plates; he was 14 years old! If I’d known he was coming, I’d have stayed at home! He would not have broken into our house if I had been at home! These things would not have been stolen and we would not have had all feelings that go with a house being broken into if I’d stayed at home that day rather than going to a meeting in the city centre! The thief doesn’t send you a postcard; he arrives unannounced!

That is the only sense in which Jesus is to be compared to a thief in the night; He comes unannounced. No amount of speculation about dates will come up with the right answer because Jesus will come unannounced! “*Therefore, keep...*” (*Matthew 24:42*) We had a conversation in our Church Wednesday Bible study last week about being “watchful” and we discovered how many ways we could understand what it means to be “watchful”: it is about the kind of people we are; it is about careful about our lives; it is about trying to cut out the mistakes; it is thinking about what we’re doing, not just meandering along carelessly; and more. From what Jesus says here and later, the bigger picture for Him is about loyalty: keeping watch is about remaining loyal to Jesus, holding on to Jesus as Lord, continuing to serve Him, continuing to put His ways into practice. Don’t let that loyalty to Jesus sag or drift!

Noah had a hard time. God told him to build an ark to save people from the flood that was coming. He did what God said and people thought him mad; he was building a boat miles from the sea; the idea of a flood was just a mad idea as far as the people were concerned; so they went about their business as normal while Noah built. He is described as a preacher so perhaps Noah kept telling them about God’s promise, but they kept ignoring him. The time came for the flood and the rain came on and by the time people tumbled to the idea that Noah was right, it was too late, and they were lost. The story is quite uncompromising in describing people’s lack of faith and God’s judgement on their sin. They were careless, thoughtless about the promise of God. Jesus tells that story as a warning: don’t be careless but keep watch; be watchful about our life and our faith and the kind of people we are.

- Keep watch about what we believe. It matters that we believe the right things and don’t believe the wrong things. You can read or hear some strange things today in the name of religion; even more so now that we have access to the internet or things that people post on social media. Be careful what we read and what we sign up to; it matters that we believe the right things and in all of that let the Bible be our guidebook; if it doesn’t fit with the Bible, leave it well alone.
- Keep watch about what we say. Christians can say the most wonderful words, full of grace, words that encourage and delight and build others up in their faith or express the deepest love for one another. Christians can also say the most appalling things to one another, thinking we have the right to insult and hurt and bring one another down by words spoken thoughtlessly, carelessly (in fullest sense – we don’t care!); we can speak words that make others feel small and put upon we can say things at completely the wrong time! Think about the words we say and the way we say them and when we say them,

- Keep watch about the kind of people we are. What do we do? Romans 13 has a whole list of behaviours to avoid and then Paul goes on to say, “*Rather, clothe...*” (Romans 13:14) What are the qualities we admire most about Jesus? Then be like that ourselves! What do we see in Jesus as He meets other people? Then be like that ourselves! It matters that we make the right choices about the kind of people we are!

One day, the author of history will walk onto the stage to receive glory and honour. One day the world as we know it will come to an end and there will be a new heaven and a new earth, all the old things will pass away. One day, Jesus will come again to the world, the Lord of heaven and earth, full of glory and majesty, the judge of all the earth who will set everything right. What do you make of that promise? Do you write it off, as the province of cranks who tell us when the world will end? Or we don't think about it because it doesn't make sense? Or we hold it, a precious promise, full of hope, full of glory? We long for the day when the world will be made new? “Come, Lord Jesus?” Till then, keep watch!