

Watch yourself and stay awake

Luke 21.25-38

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Before and during the Second World War, many Jews tried to escape or hide from the Nazi's. But the human mind works very strange - while all the signs were very bad, still many Jews continued to live as if all would be okay in the end.

And many allowed themselves to be deported, and they had heard of the evils that could be expected, and still, they wanted to believe that all things would be well in the end.

What is it in the human mind that can make us blind for reality, ignoring the warning sign

1. The signs: clear enough

Today is the beginning of the new year - in the church. Because it is what we call Advent I. The first Sunday of Advent.

Advent means something like 'the coming', and is ofcourse about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: First, about his coming in the flesh in Bethlehem, but also, his coming in our hearts every day, and thirdly, it is about his coming at the end of time.

So it is something we look back to - the first Christmas - and it is something we look forward to - his second coming. And it is something we work on today - his coming, again and again to us, now.

The reading of today from the Gospel of Luke, focuses on what we have to do today. How to live between Christmas and the return of Jesus Christ.

Jesus tells us that we have to stay awake. Now is this not strange? He tells us what things will happen to the disciples, to the church, and that is all very spectacularly bad.

Jesus speaks of signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity. He speaks of people fainting with fear and with forebodings of what is happening to the world, and of the powers of the heavens being shaken.

You would think that when such things happen to you, you stay awake! Jesus is coming again!

The Stoics, in the times of Jesus, regarded history as circular. They held that every three thousand years or so the world was consumed by a great fire, and then it started all over again and history repeated itself. This is also the view of Hindus today.

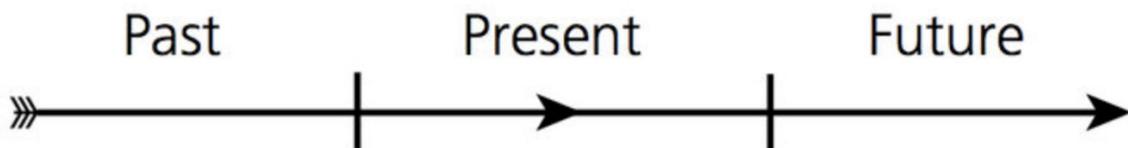
This means that history is going nowhere and men are tramping round on a kind of eternal treadmill.

The Jewish-Christian view is that history is basically linear. It started with creation, and it ends with the return of Christ.

Many secular people nowadays have adopted this Christian view that history is basically linear. But unlike Christians, they think that the line continues and continues without any goal.

Often they have this dream that things simply, over time, go better all the time.

Yes, sure, just look at the hundreds of millions who died in wars in the past 100 years. And our ability to destroy our world with nuclear weapons. Or the hunger in Yemen today; the persecutions of Christians in many countries; our economic development at the expense of nature.



The Christian concept of history is that it is linear, and that it has a goal and this goal is that one day, Jesus Christ will be Lord of all. And there will be judgment. We say this every week in church in our Creed: ‘He will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead’.

The disasters happening in this world should make us more aware of this hope. The disasters happening to us should make us look forward to that day when He will renew the world.

But it seems that it is easy to be deaf to the clamor, blind to the misery, and to not take notice of what is going on.

2. Lessons of fig tree - keep eyes open

Jesus therefore tells his disciples a short parable, about the fig tree.

Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

You see that the leaves are falling of the trees, and so you know that it is autumn and winter is about to begin.

You hear the sirens wail loudly, and you know it is the first Monday of the month, noon time.

You smell the roast, and you know it is diner time.

You see the blue sky in winter and you know it will be freezing cold.

We are very able to interpret all sorts of signs - but we are often not awake when it comes to the signs of the misery of our days as predicted by Jesus.

Luke, by the way, began his description of the lecture of Jesus about the end of days, with a vivid prediction of how Jerusalem would be destroyed, and that has happened in the year 70AD.

I think that we have to read in this context the words of Jesus that “this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.”

The generation that heard Jesus speak these words about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, really saw this happen before their own eyes; the words of Jesus were fulfilled. And this confirmed to them that they should also believe the words that Jesus spoke about his second coming.

That day we are still praying for, when in the midst of the problems of our times we pray, “Our Father who art in heaven, Thy Kingdom come!”

But it is true, as Jesus warned, that it is easy to not even notice the problems of our days, and to be asleep in regard to the things of God. The Titanic is only miles away from the iceberg, but we party on.

Or we see the misery in our world, and we ignore it as long as it does not touch us. We hear the scratching of the iceberg on the bottom of the Titanic, but we shrug our shoulders, and we think: ‘we will be fine’ and the music plays on.

Or we see the signs and it upsets, and we make a donation to Amnesty International or Oxfam, but we forget to run to the lifeboats to be saved.

If we live with open eyes and we see what is happening in our world, we must see this as the footsteps of our coming Lord, and we have to prepare seriously.

Jesus warns us to take the signs seriously and to prepare for what is going on and for what is coming. If you see the leaves falling from the trees, you go to your cupboard and you make sure the winterclothes are ready.



3. How to prepare

So how do we prepare? This whole time of Advent is really a time of preparation to receive Jesus Christ who is coming.

Jesus himself uses some words that are important in this regard.

He says: Watch yourselves. Have a good look at yourself. Do some introspection.

And if you do that, make sure that you do not let your heart be drawn downward by dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life.

I admit, I needed to look up what dissipation is... the dictionary told me: “overindulgence in sensual pleasures.” Getting drunk while the Titanic is already tilting.

In the midst of all the troubles of life, do not be a feast beast. Do not ignore the problems in the world by trying to forget about them.

But Jesus also warns against the opposite response: Do not become depressed by the cares of this life.

Whatever befalls us, let us not forget that we cannot add one meter to the length of our life. Do not neglect, and do not over-worry.

We can trust in God. In the beginning of Luke’s chapter on the end of things, Jesus promises that “not a hair of your head will perish.” If God cares so much for you that not even one hair will perish, he will certainly take care of your body and your soul.

Do not be a feast beast, and do not worry too much. This is so Anglican of Jesus. The Via Media. The road in the middle. Or to use an expression from Homer in Greek times, we have to manoeuvre the ship of our life between the two evils of Scylla and Charybdis.

How do we avoid that we ignore the signs of the times, or that they make us overly worried?

Jesus says, “stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Prayer is our number one response. Prayer is how we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. Prayer is how we avoid that we neglect the days we live in or that we become too worried. Prayer is how we prepare for Christmas.

Because prayer is in fact, allowing Jesus Christ to enter into your heart and soul today.

We wait for his Kingdom, we await the King, and that is why we live today as servants of the King.

And being connected to the King today, gives us the spiritual and the mental power to “straighten up and raise our heads”, even in the hurricanes of life, “because our

redemption is drawing near.” To straighten up and raise your head means that we are able to adopt a posture of hope and confidence.

Through prayer we will grow in a deeper knowledge of the riches of Jesus Christ.

And we become stronger in awaiting his eternal blessings.

We become more dedicated to faithfully responding to the love of God. In short, we will see the Kingdom of God become more real in our life today.

A Christian has his eyes open to the world - we see what’s going on - the good, the bad, the ugly. But we see what happens as signs of his coming Kingdom.

We have our eyes open to God. We bring the world, the church, each other, ourselves, prayerfully into the orbit of God, and we look forward to what is to come. To the one who is to come.

My suggestion for us is, let us make this time of Advent a time of prayer. Read your newspapers, watch the news on TV, do not live in denial of what is happening around. But in response, pray. Pray for the world. Pray for the people.

And pray for yourself. If you presently hardly pray, then as a start, pray the Lord’s Prayer a few times every day. Or pray the anglican morning prayer and evening prayer.



But in any case, adopt a systematic approach - a discipline - to be with God, and to pray to him. That gives you the stamina to stand straight up when the days get harder.

Conclusion

If we live in this way, awake and prayerful, then the day when he comes, or the day when we die, will be a day of joy and not of terror.

For with God’s help our prayers, our vigilance will mean that our souls are ready to receive the visit of the Lord; they are in the state of grace.

In meeting Christ we will not be meeting a judge who will find us guilty; instead he will embrace us and lead us into the house of his Father to remain there with him forever.

+ Amen