

10am HC 30 November 2025

Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44 – The best way to be ready for Christ's return is to live in the light of Christ

These days in Cambridge we take for granted that academics collaborate with people across the world. But in the 1960s and 1970s, when my dad was a physics professor at Hull University, he was a rarity because he worked with people from countries it was still unusual even to visit, like the USSR and China. Even so, our family was completely taken by surprise at the arrival of my dad's Japanese collaborator, with his wife and his two small children. They turned up at the expected time, but an entire day too soon. My mum somehow managed to put together a welcome meal for eight (and was never so thankful for having a freezer!). We never quite got to the bottom of how it happened; something may have been said about not factoring in that in coming from Japan, the family would be crossing the date line. But we definitely weren't ready!

Advent is all about waiting: not for Christmas, but for Christ's return, and the challenge is that nobody knows when it will happen. Jesus says ***about that day and hour no one knows***, not the angels, not even Jesus himself, but only God the Father. Everybody is to ***keep awake because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming***. And so today's Gospel reading is not about waiting patiently, but about being constantly ready for Christ's return. This is the readiness of the runner on the starting blocks, waiting for the starting pistol for the 100m sprint; the relay runner waiting to grab the baton; the astronaut, waiting for lift-off.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is speaking privately to his disciples and he makes waiting for Christ's return sound very scary. Let's look at it together (you can find the page references for Matthew 24 verses 36 to 44 on your pew-sheet) to find the blessing for Christians in what Jesus says. As Jesus tells his disciples, if there was a night when you knew the thief would come between midnight and 2am, of course you would stay awake. If you knew when your country would be invaded, of course you have time to get defences in place. But if you don't know when it will happen, you must be constantly ready.

And we don't know the precise date and time when Christ will come again. Anybody who has ever tried to get children ready for school knows they need a lot of warning that the deadline is imminent. Hard enough when you know the timing; even more difficult when we don't know it.

All we know about the timing of Christ's return is that it will be sudden. So sudden people will still be doing the ordinary things that take for granted there'll be a tomorrow much the same as today: ***as in those days before the flood, [when] they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day ... the flood came and swept them all away.***

But even if we don't know when Christ will come, we have been warned that Christ will come. And there is grace in that warning, because we have a choice about how we respond.

This week I heard from my daughter-in-law that every household in the Netherlands is being sent a "Think Ahead" leaflet, urging people to put together the things needed in an emergency - like candles, first aid kit, non-perishable food - in the event of a major power outage, or a cyberattack. It made her feel very anxious, and only slightly reassured when I said that our own government says the same thing on the GOV.UK website.

My daughter-in-law is from Puebla in Mexico: a city so close to an active volcano - Popocatepetl or the "Smoking Mountain" – it is constantly monitored. And in Puebla it is not just the volcano to be concerned about: the frequency and severity of earthquakes within a 100km radius are recorded daily. She never felt anxious about either the volcano or about the earthquakes, she knew exactly what to do in the event of either happening.

There is grace in being forewarned of Christ's coming.

There's another thing to notice in our Gospel reading which, when we think about it, is an aspect of God's grace. When Jesus talks about two people being in a field, or two women grinding meal, and ***one will be taken, and one will be left***, we can't know whether Jesus means one will be taken to heaven and one

left, or one will be taken off to their death, and one left unscathed. But Jesus' point, which he repeats, is that people will be in identical circumstances, doing identical things, and ***one will be taken, and one will be left***. What happens will not depend on our circumstances. It will depend on us, and on how we respond to Jesus having come to offer us salvation. When God sent Samuel to anoint David as king, God told Samuel ***the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart***.

It is a good thing for us that our fate isn't going to depend on whether we have found favour with other people, and whether they would judge us worthy. How could any mortal person decide who should be with God in heaven? Which of us knows what is in somebody else's heart?

Christ won't judge us by our success or failure in the way that the world does. He took on himself all our failures, mistakes and regrets, and all that we are sorry for. He took on all of our sin when he offered himself up for death on the cross. Christ will judge us according to whether we were willing to put our trust in his offer of salvation; willing to recognise Christ as our Saviour; willing to make him the Lord of our lives; to make room for him in our hearts, and to see our lives radically altered as a result.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul says that ***now is the moment for you to wake from sleep***. Now is the time to ***lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light***, indeed, to ***put on the Lord Jesus Christ*** himself. The way to be in constant readiness for the return of Christ is for us to live in the light of Christ. In the words of Isaiah, ***to walk in the light of the Lord***.

In the darkness there's the temptation to behave as if nobody can see us. But if we live in the light, and by the light; the light that Christ shines into our lives and hearts, it becomes easier, as Paul puts it, ***to live honourably***. Easier, in the words of Isaiah, for us to learn the ways of the Lord, ***that we may walk in his paths***, according to ***the word of the Lord***.

For those who are ready to open their hearts and their lives to Christ; ready to live by, and in, the light of Christ, Christ's return can only be good news.