

'Parousia' - SJD – 27/11/16 – Advent Sunday – Matt. 24: 36-44

This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the battle of the Somme, when so many died. As difficult as it was for all those on the frontline it was often just as difficult for those wives, children, and parents who waved them off. As days passed they longed for the day when they would see their loved ones return. They eagerly looked forward to news and the great day of the return of the one they loved.

In much the same way Paul speaks of ***'the creation (which) waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed'***.¹ This is, of course, the day when Jesus returns to claim his inheritance and restore all things to himself. Matthew's technical expression for this return of Jesus (the Son of Man) is ***'parousia'***.^{2 3} Matthew has a tremendous amount of teaching in chapters 24 & 25 about this ***'parousia'***, which is fundamentally tied up with Jesus's teaching about the Kingdom of heaven (see eg 25:1). The kingdom has arrived with the first coming of Jesus. However ***'it has been inaugurated, but it has not yet been consummated'***.⁴ I suppose it is a little like the events following the recent election of President Trump. He is elected but his power and authority is not consummated until his formal swearing in in January. For Jesus it is slightly different, in that his kingdom and authority is already in place but not yet in all its glory. Christians therefore find themselves, at present, citizens of two countries. We belong to both this age and the age to come. We live at the intersection of the ages giving rise to what Michael Green calls the ***'glory and the shame of the Christian life and the Church'***⁵ and the ***'ambiguity of Christian experience'*** in that we are neither what we once were nor yet what we shall become. How we too should long for the ***'parousia'*** when we too will be transformed to become like Christ.⁶

So what important things does this Gospel passage teach about Jesus return?

1. There is both certainty and uncertainty

Implicit throughout the passage, in fact throughout the NT, is the truth that Jesus will return again at the end of history. Jesus himself makes this absolutely clear. ***'That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man' (v39)*** and ***'The Son of Man will come' (v44)***. There is no debate about this – it is referenced by all NT writers.⁷ At a time when history contains so many uncertainties, the return of Jesus Christ in judgement is one certain future event. This is why some have said that history is really 'His Story' – the story of God's interaction with creation and His solution to our failures. But there remains one great uncertainty. The timing of this event is completely unknown – even to Jesus. Hear what Jesus says in v. 36. ***'No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'***

¹ Romans 1:19

² Matthew 24: verses 3, 27, 37 and 39.

³ Source of footnote 2 is D. A. Hagner (1995) 'Matthew '14-28' Vol 33b Word Biblical Commentary p. 718

⁴ Michael Green (1988) 'Matthew for Today' Hodder & Stoughton p. 229

⁵ See footnote 4 p 229.

⁶ Philippians 3: 20-21.

⁷ In addition to Matthew see Mark 13:26-27, Luke 17: 26-30, John 21:22, 2 Thess. 2:1, Hebs 9:28-29, 2 Pet. 3

This means that all those people who come prophesying about the date are false prophets. Michael Green quotes Rabbi Jose who said, '**He who announces the messianic times based on calculations, forfeits his share in the future**'.⁸ This is a wise saying. Yet people will continue to look for hidden codes in the Bible. It is, though, a waste of time and energy. Jesus makes this clear in the two parables attached to our reading, and the one that immediately follows. Jesus's return will be unexpected, at a time either earlier or later than what we might think.⁹ To spend time trying to ascertain when Jesus will return is to focus too much on the details of the event, which is just as wrong as spending too little time on it by mostly or completely ignoring it. Its certainty is meant as a spur to action – to live in its light and inevitability.

2. A time of apparent normality leads into a time of extraordinary events

Jesus mentions the people at the time of Noah. They went about their lives oblivious to what was about to happen. Even Noah's construction of a boat was laughed off – after all it was miles from the sea. There is no inkling of the judgement that was to come upon them until it was too late. In a parallel passage, Luke adds another image¹⁰, that of the lives of the people of Sodom before their destruction. Today the equivalent might be a city like Christchurch NZ before the unexpected earthquake hit it! There may well be signs of Jesus' return but sadly most people will not see or understand them. BUT then all the normality will change dramatically as Jesus's return heralds the end of history, of judgement on all and the glorious creation of a new heaven and new earth of Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21.

As the Coming of Jesus is certain but the timing completely unknown the exhortation to us all is to maintain ourselves in a state of constant readiness. If we lived in a flood zone, we would carefully watch for the signs of flooding and would have prepared our plans in advance so that if and when the flood arrives we would be prepared and ready. Passages like our Gospel reading are never given just for the sake of mere information but rather that they inspire us to make an ethical response.¹¹ In practice this means the living of our lives in communion with God and in faithfulness to him. If you knew you were about to be invited to some great event you would ensure you had everything ready – clothes etc. We are invited to spend eternity in the presence of Christ. There is nothing we can do to earn that invitation but we can do much now to prepare for it, not least of all by seeking to get to know Jesus better and discover how we can serve him here and now.

Advent is a reflective time – may God draw you to reflect on who he is, what he has done for you and how you can respond in love now as we prepare for his return. Amen

⁸ Green (1988) op.cit p. 235

⁹ Blomberg quoted in Hagner op cit p. 718. 1st parable (Jesus not expected), 2nd (return is sooner), 3rd (return is later) Based on passages Matt. 24: 37-44, 45-51 and 25: 1-13.

¹⁰ Luke 17: 26-29

¹¹ Hagner op.cit p. 721