

Living with a Vision

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

(1st Advent)

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Introduction

The Bible readings of today are a great start for the beautiful Advent season; during Advent we are reminded of the desire of the righteous people in Israel for the coming of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. And we also focus on our own expectation of his return to our earth one day, to wipe all tears from our eyes, to make all things well.

When Isaiah spoke to the people of God, 700 years before Christ, he had to warn them; the sins of the nation had made it ripe for the outpouring of Gods anger.

The people were living in spiritual and moral darkness, and therefore the core of the message of the prophet was that the land, that is Judah and Jerusalem, would be completely laid waste and totally plundered.'(Isaiah 24:3).

But Isaiah did not only have a message of doom, but also one of hope: 'One day, God will bless the nation again; the same countries that will punish the land on God's behalf will eventually come to back to Jerusalem, not to destroy, but to learn from the Lord. They will come to the Temple of God to seek for the laws of God.' In beautiful words the prophet paints the future of the world:

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
+ He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

These verses, about all weapons that will one day be changed into gardening tools, are inscribed in the walls at the entrance of the head quarters of the United Nations in New York. May the world, one day, be able to live in peace. May we, in Egypt, and Sudan, and Israel and Palestine, in Korea, be blessed with this peace.

The United Nations do a lot of good work, but they will not usher in the rule of divine peace on earth. For that, we await the coming of God to this world, the return of Jesus Christ.

This return of Jesus Christ at the end of history is eternally important. It means that fate does not rule the world; economics do not dictate what happens, dictators, the devil, and deep darkness do not have the last word. God had the last word.

God holds the world in his loving hands, and in the end, he is going to make all things new. Sin, sadness, hunger, violence, injustice, all that will be done away with.

What a comfort for us. And so very sure. God has spoken, so it will surely happen. As surely as the Son of God became a man on earth, as surely as he died for our sins, as surely as he rose from the dead, as surely as he ascended into heaven, so surely is his return one day.

The gospel reading from Mathew 24 speaks of this return of Jesus Christ, and the focus there is on how to prepare for the coming of God to make this world into paradise again. How do we, today, prepare for his return in power and glory?

1 Not by calculating

If you go to any Christian bookshop, you realize that many people prepare for the return of Christ by writing books about it, and by buying, maybe even reading those books.

Certainly in the western world, shelves are filled with 'the latest insight', 'know what will happen', 'the final word on the end of times'. We regularly hear of people who believe that they can calculate when Jesus will come back! Throughout Christian history, many have tried to do this.

The year 1000 was seen as highly important, the year 2000, but people have also give 1844, 1914, 1988, and many other dates. One Christian leader in my native country, the Netherlands, said last month that he expects the return of Christ to be within 25 years.

In the time of Jesus the apocalyptic fever ran very high. Many Jews were taken up by this issue of calculating when the Messiah would come, and based on Old Testament prophesies, they had a clear picture in mind of what the time of the Messiah would look like.

When he did eventually come, most missed him altogether, as his coming did not match their expectations.

Most of the Jews in Jesus' time did not see how the coming of Jesus Christ to their land was a beginning fulfilment of the advent-expectation:

Jesus taught in the temple, so the word of God went out from the temple. And after the day of Pentecost, the apostles also taught in the temple. And people from all nations came, on the day of Pentecost, to Jerusalem and thousands accepted the Word of God. Later the same apostles went into the whole world to proclaim the word of God all over the world.

And Jesus, the true temple of God, continues to attract great masses of the nations to find God through him. The promises of God are being fulfilled! One in every 3 people on earth listens to his word, especially in this period of Advent and Christmas.

Jesus gives us a clear warning that we should not be spending our time calculating when he will return, imagining how and where and when. These are just mind games that are unrelated to reality.

The angels stand in a very close relationship to God. They will be intimately involved in the events leading up to the return of Jesus Christ, as they were involved in his first coming to this world.

But they do not know the day or the hour, says Jesus. Even the Son of God himself does not know when the Father will want him to return, says Jesus.

When the Son of God had become a baby, he adopted humanness into himself, and he laid down, for a period of 33 years, the full 'usage' of his divinity. So while on earth, Jesus as a man only knew what the Father made known to him. And the Father had not told him when the day of his return to earth was going to be.

If only God has this knowledge, we can only conclude that any effort to calculate or predict the date of his return is useless. Well, not just useless, even dangerous.

Michael Green, a British Anglican theologian, calls the efforts to calculate the return of Christ and the whole Christian business of end time infatuation 'positively dangerous'. He says:

On the one hand they preoccupy peoples' attention and detract from living usefully and responsibly in this world now; on the other, they breed the disillusionment that springs from disappointed hopes and unwarranted predictions. Jesus said he did not know. We can be sure that nobody else does.

The purpose of prophesy is not to give us history written in the future tense, but, like brief film previews and danger warnings on a highway, it is intended to lift our hearts in expectation and to warn us.

2 Not by eating and drinking

The opposite of this feverish interest in what will exactly happen, and when, is also very unhealthy. The

opposite view is that this world will continue forever as if nothing will ever change.

Jesus warns that many people, at the time of his return, will live like the people at the time of Noah, when suddenly they were washed away by the Great Flood. Jesus does not say that those people lived bad lives; he only focuses on the fact that they lived as if life would continue unchanged forever.

They were eating and drinking and marrying. All the normal things of life. And then, when the flood came, they were totally surprised, but by then it was too late. When our Lord returns, people will live in a similar way, doing their business, not expecting anything to ever change.

What is wrong with eating and drinking? Nothing at all. In fact, by means of eating and drinking, we are even able to glorify God. St Paul writes: 'Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God' (1 Cor 10:31). So by eating, drinking, marrying, we can glorify God. But we can also dishonour with him. When we become wrapped up in them and see them as ends in themselves, they become idols.

John Calvin, the Reformer, called mankind 'idol machines'. We are able to create one idol after another. If we only eat and drink and marry and go about our business on earth as ends in themselves, unrelated to God and his will, then all these activities become idols, and a curse for ourselves.

And let us be honest to ourselves: it is so easy to let our life be taken up by all the smaller and bigger matters of children, financial survival, your marriage, what shall we have for dinner, washing the car, feeding the cat. These things are not bad in themselves, but they can keep us away from God.

We should never become so immersed in this time, that we forget eternity. Never let your concern for the affairs of this world – however important – distract you from God. Life and death are in his hands. So be ready when he comes.

Eating and drinking, working in the field, grinding to make food, these are not bad things to do. They are good. The issue is the heart of man. That is brought home by Jesus very clearly by speaking of the two people working in the field and two working in a mill. It seems all people are involved in similar work. It seems there is no difference. But God knows the difference – he looks at our hearts. Does he find faith that expects his coming?

3 By being watchful

St John Chrysostom, in his commentary on the Gospel of Mathew, explains why in his opinion God decided to not tell mankind when he would renew the world:

He wants to keep them on their toes looking for it, that they may be always striving. This is why he made the end of each person's life so uncertain. (On Gospel of Matthew, Homily 77.2)

Years ago we lived in Holland in a nice neighbourhood, so nice that one evening I had forgotten to lock the back yard door. The next morning, when I wanted to go to work, my laptop was gone. Stolen from the hall where I had left it. Police came, made a report, and I never saw my computer again. Insurance did not pay either, because I had left my back door unlocked.

How do we behave if we know that a thief comes to bless our home with a visit? I tell you what I would do! I would turn all the lights on, I would lock the doors, and I would sit in my living room with a baseball bat. I would make sure that I would be ready!

Jesus tells us to be watchful, to be constantly alert. Live a sanctified life, conscious of the fact that He will return. Be watchful, expect him! And do not think that you still have enough time, and that you will live your life with God later...

Let me tell you a story:

Three demons-in-training were coming to this earth to finish their training. They were talking to satan, their chief trainer, about their plans for tempting men and women.

The first said to satan that he wanted to tell people: there is not God. 'You are not ready yet', was satan's answer. You can't tempt people with that, they know there is a God.

The next one said: 'I will tempt them by saying there is no hell'. He was also dismissed. 'You are not ready. People know there is a hell for sin', satan responded.

The third one had another temptation: 'I will tell them there is no hurry'. 'You have just graduated, you are ready, go to earth!' satan said. 'You will ruin them by the thousands'.

The most dangerous delusion is that there is plenty of time. There are things that must not be put off, for none of us knows whether tomorrow ever comes.

Every new generation of Christians has to live in the expectation of Christ's return. And even though we know that only his coming will make all things new, our expectation of that great renewal of the world encourages us today to act in accordance with the glorious peace that we expect.

Isaiah tells us what the proper response to our great expectation is. He does not tell us to feverishly calculate and try to put all the prophetic words of the Bible together into a refined prediction of coming events; he also does not advise carelessness, eating and drinking as if nothing ever changes. His advice:

Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Walk in the light of God! That is the proper response to prophecy in the Bible and to God's promise that He will make this whole world into a paradise again.

The light that shines in the darkness – Jesus Christ – and the presence of God that will fill the earth with his glory, that is our example for today.

The apostle John says: "God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:5-7)

Walking in the light means living in accordance with the will of God who is All Light. The opposite of light is darkness- symbolizing sin.

Conclusion

The hands of Jesus Christ created your existence, and he is the one who carries you through life, and his outstretched hands await you in the end.

Because God will one day heal all sickness, we also today work for the healing of people.

One day, this world will be peaceful, therefore today we try to reconcile people and live peacefully.

The end time view of history shows us what God desires, and as much as we can, we live in accordance with this today.

That is walking in the light. That is the watchfulness our Lord Jesus Christ expects of us.

That is the challenge of Advent. We expect our Lord, yes we desire for his coming. And we live for him today.

+Amen.