

“Looking Forward” – Mat 24:36-44 – Advent I – Nov 28,2004

The excitement of the Christmas season is starting to build, isn't it? It's only November, but already lights are up, store decorations are in place, some restaurants are already playing Christmas carols. It seems to me like we're peaking a bit early – can you imagine being a young parent today trying to deal with keeping the kids revved up for a whole month? Can you imagine dealing with them if you manage to keep them revved up that long?!

There's a similar kind of problem in the Christian faith – a problem that Matthew recognized, and to which Jesus spoke – and that is the problem of getting tired of the waiting. Long before Christmas became Christmas, at least as we know it, long before there were trees and tinsel, eggnog and office parties, long before there were lawn deer made out of tiny lights, and crowded airports and football scrums in huge retail stores, Matthew recognized the problem of the excitement of the faithful beginning to wear a bit thin.

At first the excited anticipation of Christ fulfilling his promised return was everywhere. People would gather in worship, and look over their shoulders, sure that this would be the moment that he would reappear. Cloud formations, storms, volcanoes, locust plagues – every unexpected hiccup in nature was seen as the sure sign that the end was at hand, that Christ stood ready to make a heaven-and-earth-shaking re-entry.

But you can only keep up that kind of excitement so long, right? It's hard work! It takes a lot of energy, a lot of emotional commitment to keep yourself on the edge of your seat for a month, or two. How about a year? What about ten years – can you keep the same level of excitement up for ten years? There are some people who can, and some situations like a happy marriage where it's possible, but for the most part it's exhausting work to keep up a high level of excited anticipation. Naturally enough people start to tire, to lose some of the excitement. Some even start to question why, and to drift away. It doesn't matter whether the focus of a group is religion, or politics, or dancing, or a book club, or whatever – keeping the group excited and motivated is always a balancing act. Not enough anticipation, and people lose interest. Too much anticipation, for too long, and people lose strength, and lose interest.

This problem of keeping people motivated has been a challenge to leaders since people began to congregate in groups of two or more. Various techniques have been tried over the countless ages, and those techniques, however varied, fall into only a few categories, primarily into being either a 'stick' or a 'carrot', a lure or a coercion. Bribery is a common technique, often a favourite of political leaders, due in large part because of the rapid response, the relatively quick resurgence of excitement and support. Bribery works particularly well in politics, as the leaders are not offering their own resources – they are able to lure the voters using the voters own money! There are a number of problems with the bribery approach, however. The first is the problem of escalating expectations – or as my mother used to put it, “much wants more”. The bribe that works today is usually not enough for tomorrow, and a purchased allegiance is pretty shallow – the excitement usually turns very quickly to disappointment and resentment.

A second approach is the scare tactic, and that is essentially the approach we hear in this reading from Matthew's gospel. “Keep awake!” is the admonition, with a not-so-subtle implication that danger, tragedy, catastrophe will strike if you don't keep awake. Our reading begins with the conclusion of Jesus' discourse on the coming end of the age. Jesus has spoken at some length about the signs that will accompany his return, signs that include major cosmic disruptions. He ends his discourse with a caution about trying to predict exactly when that will happen. “Nobody knows when that will happen – neither angels of heaven nor the Son – only God knows.” Now, people don't like having uncertain times hanging over them. We are not comfortable with a solid statement of uncertainty like “only God knows”. Matthew, ever ready to use the command model and to issue

warnings (my favourite as you know is his repeated “woe to you” section just ahead of this one) is not content to leave it there either, and so he includes other teachings of Jesus to expand on the subject.

To his original readers, who were slacking off from their avid anticipation and beginning to simply live life, to eat and drink, to marry and give in marriage, Matthew provides a reminder that that was just what the people of Noah’s day were doing when the Flood took them (literally!) by surprise. Not just “keep watch!” but “watch out!” – pay attention to God is the clear message.

Things are a little less drastic with the second warning. Compared to the 99.99% catastrophe rate of the Flood, and perhaps recalling God’s rainbow covenant that he wouldn’t do that again, the second warning gives people a 50/50 chance – with perhaps the other guy in the field being taken, or the other woman grinding grain disappearing. Quite the opposite of today’s popular view of the rapture, the idea here is to keep watch so as NOT to be the one taken by surprise!

Frankly, I have a bit of trouble with the optics of the third example of why you should keep awake. I can see how a motivational speaker getting wound up on the topic of staying alert could include the example of watching to prevent a thief in the night from robbing you, but the implied parallel between the promised return of Christ and a thief in the night seems to me to be at best a very odd connection, which perhaps explains the somewhat lame conclusion that restates the obvious, “you must be ready”.

Scare tactics work, and are effective over a much longer time than bribery, but scare tactics still have a limited lifetime. As long as there is some element of fear, people will still heed the warnings. But as more and more time goes by, and nothing drastic has happened, the fear gradually subsides until the warnings have little, if any, remaining effect. Now that the earth has orbited the sun some two thousand times since Matthew committed these warnings to paper, a lot of time has gone by with only the usual catastrophes – storms, earthquakes, wars, famines, plagues and other assorted nastiness. The fear of the day of the Lord has pretty much dwindled down to either a topic for theological study, or a misguided focus of bizarre sects – we have just passed the 20th anniversary of the Jonestown tragedy as an reminder of an example of that kind of inappropriate focus.

How then can we be motivated to maintain our vigilance in faith? What would work to keep us alert to the return of Christ? I suggest that the one motivator that is timeless, that can keep us looking forward in positive anticipation is hope. Far from seeing the day of the Lord as a moment of doom and destruction, we can look forward in hope to a release from the usual catastrophes of life. Yes, the day of the Lord is a cosmic moment of judgment, but it is also for us the moment when with Christ’s protection and blessing we are ushered into the presence of God, into the assembly of the great host joyfully praising God, freed from the burdens of tears and pain and sorrow.

When will that happen? Only God knows – we have that from Jesus himself. It might be before lunch today. Or just before bedtime. Or in the middle of the night. Or maybe next year. Or perhaps two thousand years from now. “Not possible!”, you say? That’s probably what Matthew and more than a few of the early Christians said two thousand years ago. Ten thousand years from now? Who knows? God knows, and only God knows, Jesus said. For each of us that moment will come at some point – God willing it won’t be from being hit by a bus on the way home from this service, but at some moment, unexpected or not, we will come face to face with our Lord, and it certainly would be a good idea to be as prepared as possible.

But prepared because of bribery? No. Living in fear? No. In hope? Certainly. Prepared in hope, provided by Jesus himself, who assured us that he came not to condemn the world but that the world would find salvation through believing in him. In hope, assured by Jesus himself and demonstrated by him that even death could not separate us from his love.

By all means, stay alert, keep awake in your faith, but live your life in the certain hope that Christ will not let you go, that he will one day welcome you into his open arms, safe and secure on the day of the Lord.