

Stephen's sermon 30/11/14

Speaking of His return Jesus says that “No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” so we might think there is no point in concerning ourselves with it. Why did the owner of the house not keep watch on the night his house was broken into? – He didn't know he was about to be burgled.

No one is going to sit up every night on the off-chance that their house might get burgled. But if you get a tip-off that burglars are about, then you would be wise to keep a sharp watch-out.

This is Jesus point. No-one is going to wait up for a burglar unless he has reason to expect it. The issue Jesus is addressing in this series of warnings and parables is that although we do not know with certainty *when* Jesus will return, we can be certain He *will*. Furthermore, observant Christians are in a position to get a tip-off when it is imminent.

Jesus says His coming will be like “in the days before the flood, when people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark;” But whilst everyone else went about their normal lives, Noah waited in the ark. – Noah heeded God's warning whereas the rest did not!

Jesus, along with many others in scripture, gives us clear signs of his coming so the observant may be prepared:

"Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door." (vv 32-33).

He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. "Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" (Lk 12:54-56)

Jesus urges us not to be ignorant of the times. Not to be blind to the signs. Not to be caught unprepared like unbelievers who have no hope in God. As people of God we should not be ignorant. There are things we can and should

know about God's activity in the world which should cause our lives to be different.

Consider the parable of the widow and the unjust judge: why did she persist in her petitioning the judge? Because she knew he wanted a quiet life and so would give in to nagging. So what does Jesus tell us about God so that we will not give up praying? He tells us that God is just and merciful and quick to hear and respond to our prayers. We know something about God that motivates us to keep praying – God certainly answers!

There are things we should know about God and what He is doing in the world today that can motivate us to keep believing Him and maintain our hope and joy. To unbelievers he will come like a thief in the night, but to vigilant believers he will come following signs that awaken us to anticipate Him.

Christmas is a time when this disparity between what believers know and the blindness of the world is most extreme. The great majority of people celebrate Christmas with office parties full of drunkenness and sexual flirtations followed by more drunkenness, gluttony and materialism interspersed with mindless television. The assumption is that God is dead and Jesus is an irrelevant myth.

This is just how it was in the days of Noah. Meantime, God is steadily moving His purposes on and one day, without warning, Jesus is going to return. Although there is much we do not know for certain about that event, we do have a huge amount of scripture describing it in various ways. Matthew devotes two chapters to recalling Jesus' warnings about that day, telling us to read the signs of the times and to be ready.

When that day comes John tells us that people will "hide in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They will call to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"

Now it may not be popular these days to talk about God's wrath, but not talking about it does not make it disappear! And lest we think that God's wrath was an old testament thing, John is explicit that this is the wrath of the Lamb! Jesus' wrath against those who have stubbornly rejected the light and chosen to walk in darkness. The decision made by those who in this life choose to reject God will be respected by God on judgement day. Their rejection will not be forcibly reversed, but rather confirmed by Jesus' judgement.

We do no one any favours by toning down or shying away from these truths. And lest we think that John got carried away and that Jesus was not so harsh, we do well to recognise that Jesus said far more about eternal judgement and the eternal sorrow of those who do not choose the narrow way than any other individual in the bible.

Jesus said we should be ready. We should read the signs of the times. Isaiah describes for us the times of Jesus' return. "All nations will stream to God's kingdom" he says.

Now we all know that the media would have us believe that churches are closing down and no intelligent person believes in God anymore, so I thought it would be good to redress the balance a little and look at what God is doing in the world today and see if we can discern the times in which we live.

There is a greater world-wide focus on mission today than there has ever been before. The most difficult to reach peoples are being reached in ways and with an effectiveness never before seen. For instance hundreds of thousands of Muslims in the most closed and oppressive counties are turning to Jesus and Islamic extremists are becoming evangelists for Jesus. The media is not reporting this, but it is well documented and is happening right across the world, not just in local revivals.

The scriptures tell us that in the last days there will be a great turning of Jews to Jesus. The largest population of Jews in the world is found in the, USA where they make up nearly 2% of the population. Of these 7 million Jews, ¼ are Christian. There are could well be more Jewish Christians in the world than practicing English Christians!

We visited Nepal two years ago and were struck by how spiritually dark that country is. It is said that there are more temples than houses and more gods than people, yet it seemed like a place devoid of light and hope. It is illegal for a Nepali to convert to Christianity. The few churches there face hostile persecution from the Buddhist and Hindu communities. Yet Nepal has the fastest growing Christian church in the world. The church there looks just like the New Testament church full of excitement and signs and wonders and healings along with mass imprisonment and poverty. But Jesus is most definitely working mighty things amongst that people.

All across the world the Kingdom of God is growing stronger. The previously suppressed churches in Eastern Europe and China are growing very strongly and the churches in South America have been experiencing rapid growth for decades now.

In Africa many wonderful things are happening. As a result of the witness of just one couple in Mozambique, 10,000 new churches have been planted in that country with 1 million people coming to Christ. They have documented testimonies from 450 people who have been raised from the dead.

Along with the growth of the church, there has been a marked increase in hostility and persecution of Christians with between 1-2000 Christians being martyred each year for telling people about Jesus and around 160,000 a year being killed because of their Christian faith. Beyond these figures are the huge number of Christians imprisoned for their faith. Persecution against Christians is at an all-time.

All around the world today God is raising up thousands of ordinary believers who are taking the gospel into the streets with healings and miracles. There are hundreds of you-tube videos of healing taking place on the streets of our towns and cities. There's a café called Café-Life in Chester run by an ordinary Christian woman advertising free healings and miracles along with coffee and cake. Every day they see healings and people coming to Christ. Jesus is healing the sick and performing many other miracles on a daily basis throughout this land and across the world – even in Anglican churches!

Now you may feel that amongst your friends and colleagues faith in Christ is a rare quality, but nearly 1/3 of the world identifies themselves as Christian whereas a mere 2% of the world's population profess atheism. The vast majority of atheists live in Communist and ex-communist countries and in those countries their numbers are rapidly dwindling. Churches are growing in Eastern Europe and China at an unprecedented rate.

Do not be intimidated this Christmas by the worldliness we are surrounded by. Let us fix our eyes and hearts on our victorious risen Christ who, as the living God, comes into our midst.

It is as Isaiah said, "In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." ... Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD."