

Be Prepared

Our word “advent” comes from the Latin “adventus”, which means “coming”. We think of it as being the time to prepare for the celebration of Jesus’ birth; a season of anticipation and hope, although at its beginnings the emphasis was much more on penitence, fasting and sin. “Adventus” is the translation of the Greek word “parousia”, commonly used to refer to the Second Coming of Christ. For most Christians it is not just a celebration of a moment in time when a baby was born, but also looks beyond to a time when the Bible tells us that Jesus will come again.

When Jesus spoke of His return to His disciples, He described the distressing signs that they should watch out for but added “see to it that you are not alarmed [afraid, frightened or troubled]”. The Message puts it as “keep your head and don’t panic”! If you were told pretty much the exact time you were going to die or the world would end, what would you do?

Helen and I recently went to see the film “The Martian”, where an astronaut gets left on Mars when the rest of his crew make an emergency evacuation, thinking he’s been killed in an accident. He makes a video diary, assuming he’ll never be found but documenting what he does in case *it* is found. At one point he calculates how many days’ food supply is available based on the fact that there were 6 in the crew and they were supposed to be there for 30 days but NASA always over-caters etc etc and then comments that he might not even last that long because there probably won’t be enough water or oxygen available! The point is that he has fairly accurately predicted the date of his death based on real factors. So, without giving the whole film plot away, what does he do? He chooses to be proactive and make water from resources at his disposal, grow plants and therefore produce oxygen in order to prolong what he considers to be his life expectancy in the hope that he might be rescued.

Jesus wants us to continue to be strong in our faith, even when the world around us is falling apart. We must constantly be prepared for His return, and the terrible things that will happen beforehand.

In Matthew 25 vv 1 – 13 we read the parable of the ten bridesmaids (God’s Word Translation):

When the end comes, the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids. They took their oil lamps and went to meet the groom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The foolish bridesmaids took their lamps, but they didn’t take any extra oil. The wise bridesmaids, however, took along extra oil for their lamps. Since the groom was late, all the bridesmaids became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight someone shouted, ‘The groom is here! Come to meet him!’ Then all the bridesmaids woke up and got their lamps ready. The foolish ones said to the wise ones, ‘Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out.’ But the wise bridesmaids replied, ‘We can’t do that. There won’t be enough for both of us. Go! Find someone to sell you some oil.’ While they were buying oil, the groom

arrived. The bridesmaids who were ready went with him into the wedding hall, and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids arrived and said, 'Sir, sir, open the door for us!' But he answered them, 'I don't even know who you are!' So stay awake, because you don't know the day or the hour.

It was a custom used among the Jews at a wedding, that the bridegroom came with his friends late at night to the house of the bride, where she and her bridesmaids expected him, and when they were given notice of the bridegrooms' approach, the bridesmaids were to go out with lamps in their hands to light him into the house with ceremony and formality in order to rejoice at the occasion. The wedding party would then process from the bride's to the groom's home, or in this case the wedding hall, accompanied by singing and dancing, hence requiring light.

The duty of the bridesmaids was to wait upon the bridegroom until he appeared. Although this event was **certain**, it was not necessarily imminent! Their chief concern was to have lights in their hands when they attended the bridegroom to do him honour and service. The lamps in ancient weddings were not the small, hand-held lamps used under normal circumstances, but perhaps sticks wrapped with oiled rags. The 5 bridesmaids who were ready would not share their oil. "Readiness" is not something that can be shared in that way. Jesus could have told a parable about sharing but that was not the point He was making. It would have destroyed the point of this parable for the wise bridesmaids to share their oil. The 5 who were not ready dishonoured the bridegroom and did not do what they'd been asked, so they were not welcome at the end.

It is a widely accepted interpretation of the parable that the (collective) church is the bride and Christ is the bridegroom. We, as individuals, are represented by the bridesmaids and are responsible for ushering in Christ on His return. Therefore, we have to be prepared! The coming of this Day is **certain**, not necessarily imminent; but we have to live as though it is.

How?

Cleansed - **Clothed** - **Confident**

Titus 3 vv 11-13: God has revealed his grace for the salvation of all people. That grace instructs us to give up ungodly living and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this world, as we wait for the blessed Day we hope for, when the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ will appear.

The bridesmaids in the parable would have all been virgins as was the tradition; they were therefore pure. Likewise, we must purify ourselves by constantly checking our thoughts and actions, keeping short accounts with God regarding sin and seeking forgiveness whenever needed. They were considered to be specially chosen to do the required task; a joyful duty at that. We too are set apart as Christians to do the tasks God requires of us.

1 Peter 1 vv 13-15: Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.

The bridesmaids would also be dressed in the appropriate clothing for the occasion, but actually more importantly, they would be carrying the lamps and oil they needed. God has given us armour that we must put on every day in order to be ready:

“Put on all the armour that God gives you, so that you will be able to stand up against the Devil's evil tricks. For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age. So put on God's armour now! Then when the evil day comes, you will be able to resist the enemy's attacks; and after fighting to the end, you will still hold your ground. So stand ready, with truth as a belt tight around your waist, with righteousness as your breastplate, and as your shoes the readiness to announce the Good News of peace. At all times carry faith as a shield; for with it you will be able to put out all the burning arrows shot by the Evil One. And accept salvation as a helmet, and the word of God as the sword which the Spirit gives you. Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help.” (Ephesians 6 vv 11-18a; Good News Translation)

Luke 12 v 35 in the Amplified Bible says “Be dressed and ready for active service, and keep your lamps continuously burning.” In Jesus' time, everyone wore long robes which were a hindrance if they needed to move quickly or freely. In this case, the robe would be tucked into a sash around the waist so that it would not interfere with their movements. The verb used [be being] indicates a state of perpetual readiness for action.

Jesus said “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness.” The ‘oil’ used to light our lamps is grace. Because we have been shown grace, we must also show grace and in that way, be the light in the darkness; standing out from the norm.

Lastly, the bridesmaids were confident in the fact that the bridegroom was going to arrive.

Hebrews 10 vv 23 – 25: Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

If you were expecting a guest to arrive, it is usual to prepare yourself and your house. If they are staying the night, you would make up a bed for them in advance and make sure you have enough food in to make them feel as welcome as possible. The carpets would be vacuumed and the surfaces dusted. I guess that if you have children, you would try to coach them in some way as to what they were and weren't supposed to say or do, whilst the guest was there? However, if that visit got delayed for whatever reason, you wouldn't allow the dust to build back up again and the carpets to get covered in hay (if you have rabbits, like me) and the food to run out because you didn't go shopping ... it would be a continual "keep on top of things" type of preparation, so you were never *unready*. You would want to be proud to answer the door before the guest has even knocked because you know they won't find anything to be ashamed of.

Another analogy is that when I offered myself to be on the preaching rota, I knew when the day was coming that I had to start writing something to say; just having the initial idea and being aware of resources I could use wasn't good enough! It had to be put into practice. Standing at the front on the day with only the bare framework would have meant forgetting important points and not actually doing the task I'd volunteered to do. I'd be cross with myself, and look stupid in the process.

Preparing for Jesus to arrive is about getting our hearts right (over and over again), and helping others get theirs right (over and over again!) Our initial redemption (cleansing) is the first step in being ready but is not the final step. We must use the tools God has given us and the assets he has clothed us with. We must show our confidence in the faithful One who promised that the Day *is* approaching by encouraging one another and meeting together regularly. That way, those who are good at (figurative) cleaning, cooking, tidying etc can help those who find it difficult.

James 5 vv 7 – 9: Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!