

Matthew 24:36-44, Romans 13:11-14 – What are we waiting for?

OK, tomorrow is the start of December – and today Advent begins. You've been ticking off the last tasks for 2025, organising catch-ups, RSVPing to Meryl and Kathy for the Church Christmas Party on Saturday 13th (if you haven't done this, the good news is you can do it today!), negotiating round one of 'who's hosting Christmas this year', finishing the shopping (or at least the list), thinking about putting up the tree and you come to church – expecting something a little bit cheery – and then the minister asks you, *"Are you ready, are you ready and waiting for the end of the world?"*

It's not what you expect is it? And it's not the minister's fault. She blames the lectionary! The first Sunday of Advent breaks in – like the thief in the night in the reading – to remind us we are not just waiting for Christmas day in this season but waiting for the 'day of the Lord'. *So, what are we waiting for?*



I have a confession. We subscribe to a few streaming services, and recently we watched a film – an apocalyptic political thriller – about people going about an ordinary day – *"eating and drinking,"* as our text says, *"marrying and giving in marriage"* – when a single, unattributed missile is launched at the United States, when the Ground Based Interceptor (GBI) system doesn't intercept it, and then when multiple retaliatory strikes are planned...

The US Department of Defense has criticised the film. According to official data the GBI system has a success rate of 100%, not 61% as in the film, but screenwriter Noah Oppenheimer points out the overall success rate is 57% - lower than what the film portrayed. And the film has no "Hollywood ending". Instead, director Kathryn Bigolow uses another narrative trick to end the drama, wanting to spark an ongoing conversation about living in a world – a 'house of dynamite' she calls it – containing over 12,000 nuclear weapons.

I also frequently read this book, and stand here in front of all of you and speak about a different kind of future – a future envisioned by God, spoken of by the prophets, fulfilled, Jesus says, in him, *"where the poor hear good news, where the captives are released, where the blind recover their sight, where the oppressed are set free, the year of the Lord's favour"*; a future now lived out, lived in, lived into, by Jesus' followers, by we who are the church.

The 'day of the Lord', in Jewish thinking, is a combination of both scenarios; like the film it is – Zephaniah 1:15 - *"A day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness..."* – and in the vision of God's ultimate reign, God promises – Isaiah 61:4 - *"They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations."*

It is no wonder then that Jesus' disciples, having Jesus in their midst, ask - both because they are dreading the coming of this day and because they are longing for the coming of this day - at the beginning of chapter 24, "*When will this be and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*"

And Jesus has bad news for them. Firstly, he can't tell them because he doesn't know. Verse 36: "*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" And secondly that they cannot turn on or turn off their watching and readiness for Christ's coming depending on what is happening around them; they must constantly be ready. Verse 42: "*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*"

I have another confession. When I was very young, around four years old, I made the opposite of a Christian commitment. From what I'd heard in church and Sunday School I'd distilled that one day I'd be required to give a reckoning of my life to God; that God would come for me. So, I planned that when that day came, I'd run to Jesus and hide. But not until then! I don't know what "pleasures of sin" I intended to enjoy for a season at age four, but I was a very wilful child. (You can't see her, but my mother is watching this on YouTube and nodding.) Anyway, that my plan.



(My image of Jesus was based, I think, on the crypt scene in *Sound of Music* – Jesus was a rock that would hide me – when I needed him.)

You don't have to be four years old, however, to adopt this kind of thinking; that it is too hard to sustain a life of faith, a life of readiness, responsiveness to God. (I am thinking of actor Broderick Crawford's quote, "*I am what you call a death bed Catholic.*") Both of our readings today and parts of 2 Thessalonians we've been looking at over the past month, are reminders that we need encouragement – daily encouragement - to live the life of faith, to keep awake, to put on the armour of light, to put on Jesus Christ who - contrary to what I thought as a four year old – is the embodiment – not the antithesis of God's love for us, and who, in his death and resurrection, is the fulfilment of God's saving work in our world.

There are times, however, that we need particular encouragement because waiting can be hard. I've had multiple conversations with people this week who are asking, for multiple reasons, where is God in what I am experiencing? When is God going to act? What is God trying to teach me? These sound like different questions to, "*When is the day of the Lord going to come?*", but they share the same struggle with suffering – as Ben mentioned a few weeks ago. *What are we waiting for?*

What we know for certain from these readings is that although we are still waiting for the final outworking of God's saving work accomplished in Jesus,

God has not abandoned us. Three times in this passage, at beginning, middle and end, there is the promise of the, “*coming of the Son of Man*” emphasising the surety of God’s promise in this Messiah. As theologian William Barclay writes, “*The world [and we could add – and our lives] are still the scene in which God’s purpose is being worked out.*” This is what we are waiting for.

I have another confession. I went up to Sydney after last Sunday and my mother said (because she had watched the service on YouTube), “*You didn’t mention that Pop (my father’s father), like the people in the Thessalonian church, quit his job because he thought Jesus was coming back soon.*”

It’s true. My Pop joined the navy at aged 14 and was a radio operator in WW1. He became a Christian and married my nanna and for a number of years, while they had seven children, worked as a truck driver. Then, as dad wrote in his family history, he “retired early”.

I wonder, and I shared this with mum, if it was post-traumatic stress that made withdrawing from the world an attractive option. Mum thinks that, being a relatively new Christian, he was easily misled by apocalyptic teaching, talk of the rapture drawn from this reading (though in Mathew it seems the unfaithful are raptured and the faithful left behind).

It would have been hard to have a father with such beliefs. I’m wondering now if my father’s work ethic was a reaction to Pop’s! But Pop remained committed to church, serving as a deacon, as a Sydney City Mission volunteer, as a member of Assembly and on Baptist Union committees (for that he surely has stars in his crown!) He didn’t take part in family gatherings, but when we children also escaped from these, he would play games and tell us stories and jokes. He was warm and funny, and flawed, and faithful in his way.

We do not know, verse 36 says, and we will not know “*about that day and hour*”. Five times in this reading our ‘unknowing’ is mentioned, but what we do know is to be ready, what we do know is that, in Jesus, God has revealed God’s immeasurably great love for this world, what we do know is that through that great love God’s purposes are still being worked out in this world and what we do know is that we are part of those purposes.

Dec. 23	Dec. 22	Dec. 21
E Emmanuel God-with-us	R Rejoice Rejoice and Sing O Israel	O O Come King of Kings
Dec. 20	Dec. 19	Dec. 18
C Christ David Key of David	R Rejoice Rejoice	A Advent Lord
Dec. 17		S Sapientia Wisdom

The Advent hymn, *O come, O come Emmanuel*, is based on the Great O Antiphons (from which we get the word antiphon), medieval music written to sung, one antiphon a day as part of the liturgy in the final seven days before Christmas. The first letter of each antiphon (after the O), when written backwards – whether by design or by accident no one knows – forms an acrostic - ‘*ero cras*’, which is translated as ‘tomorrow I will come’. It speaks to us of the surety of God’s promises to us – that God loves us, that God has saved us, that God is working out God’s purposes for our world and that we are part of that. *What are we waiting for?*

Call to Worship

The day is near.

And so we wait.

We wait with hope,

for the brokenhearted to be healed,

for the downtrodden to be lifted up.

We wait for the coming of the Christ child.

In this meantime,

We will light a candle against the darkness.

We will sing into the silence.

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, Lord of both the light and the darkness,
send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.

We who have so much to do

seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious over many things

look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways

long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy

seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people,

walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

~ written by Fr. Henri J. M. Nouwen. Posted on **Patheos**

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, we enter this new church year with song, candles and lessons. The very coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is near. Stir up in us a yearning heart, an open mind, a spirit seeking your Spirit as company for our journey of faith. And when the day of birth for Jesus finally comes, may he be born in each of us anew.

We are watching and waiting – **Come Lord Jesus.**

We bring before you, Holy Spirit, all the things that would rob us of the joy of Jesus' coming. We fearfully invite you to help us rid ourselves of quarrelling and jealousy, of self-harm and all that harms other so that we can be part of your purposes – healing and restoration and life in our world.

We are watching and waiting – **Come Lord Jesus.**

We know, Loving God, people whose needs are great. We pray today for Janelle and Phil and Jon and all Eunice's friends here – all who grieve her loss

and all who know her joy in now being with you. We pray for all who are anxious about their future, about finding work, about finding a place to call home. We pray for Merilyn as she recovers and others in our congregation having treatment. We give you great thanks for the birth of Sarasi – in the middle of a storm may this child bring your peace to Anthea, Din and Henri and others. Hear our prayers for all who need your grace.

We are watching and waiting – **Come Lord Jesus.**

In a world of rich resources, help us remember those who are in need, not only in memory, but also in love, for they are our brothers and sisters. We pray for those who has lost loved ones in Hong Kong, and those impacted by the floods in Thailand and Indonesia. Use our Christmas giving and our all-year caring, helping and living to be your people.

We are watching and waiting – **Come Lord Jesus.**

We yearn, Loving God, for the day when nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares. We yearn for the day of peace, when we can all walk in the gentle light of Christ. We look to your Son, who lived another way, and revealed love to us – love that was prepared to give itself completely. Though Christ we boldly pray.

We are watching and waiting – **Come Lord Jesus.**

All the earth, seas, and heavens are yours, and we pray these prayers because you have promised to listen to us. Amen.

Howard Therman - The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.
Amen.