

SERMON: 1 December 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Advent - Coming Soon?”

(Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44)

Coming soon - at a cinema near you.

There's always great excitement when we know something's coming that we anticipate is going to be good. Or if we know someone's coming who we haven't seen for a while and we've missed them.

Our sense of excitement is heightened if we've known or had a good experience of that thing or person and we can't wait to see it or see them again.

The followers of Jesus were rightly excited about the prospect of seeing the Risen Jesus coming back again. We think they believed it would happen in their lifetime. They wanted to know the signs of his coming again and the future events that Jesus himself spoke of.

[SLIDE] When will all this take place? And will there be any sign ahead of time to signal your return and the end of the world?
(Matthew 24:3 NLT)

It's in answer to that question that we find today's reading of the words of Jesus in Matthew 24.

It's worth comparing Matthew 24 with Luke 17 and Mark 13. If we do so, we see that Matthew has a particular Jewish emphasis on the coming of the Messiah and the end of the age, meaning the bringing together to completion of all things, something we looked at last week.

Luke has the disciples asking about when the kingdom of God will come rather than the Messiah; and Mark has the bringing together of all things and the coming of Christ as a series of events that has already begun.

What is clear from what Jesus says is that the coming of the kingdom (or the coming of the Son of Man) can be sudden and unexpected and that what matters most is that his followers be actively ready and prepared.

When Jesus says, 'you must be ready all the time', I think he's referring to the kind of readiness that doesn't sit idly by, as if, having put on our best clothes, packed our case, got the right bus to the airport, got through security and now all we have to do is wait for the flight to take off.

Not quite that sort of readiness. Active readiness works for the coming of the kingdom right up until the kingdom has come. Because Jesus began the work of the kingdom we don't sit by **until** it comes we work with him to **make it** come.

That's why I love what Shane Claiborne and his friends decided to do in Philadelphia and here's a wee video clip of what they're up to in making the kingdom come.

[Video]

[SLIDE]

Guns might not be a big problem in Kirknewton and East Calder. And so maybe we need to think of other creative ways of bringing God's kingdom nearer.

Angela is a priest in the Church of England. According to her blog, she loves Jesus, custard, music, theatre, and being creative in worshipping God.

Here is an extract from a prayer she wrote based on Isaiah 2:

In the last days
they will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

So, in these days,
we will turn around the camera
of our self-centred selfies
to take a long, loving look
at the face of Christ in others.

So, in these days,
we will upturn the podium
of our calculated competitiveness
and elevate the least among us.

So, in these days,
we will dismantle the walls of our fear,
which keep at arm's length the refugees,
the foreigners, the homeless,
and build them homes
with those same bricks and these same arms...

(<https://engageworship.org/ideas/swords-into-ploughshares-prayer>)

You and I have been made in the image of God. That means we are innately creative. We have the capacity to think creatively and when we sit in expectant waiting on God to speak into our lives, God usually always does. Then we're ready to respond.

I think that's an important part of what it means to live in a state of readiness and preparedness - to be present with, awake to and aware of God. It involves looking for the sacred in the ordinary; watching for Christ in all living things.

[SLIDE] As William Barclay put it, the waiting for the coming of Christ is a "waiting of eager expectation for the coming of glory and joy" (317). In his commentary on this passage in Matthew he tells a fable of three apprentice devils who were coming to this earth to finish their apprenticeship.

"They were talking to Satan, the chief of the devils, about their plans to tempt and ruin men. The first said I will tell them there is no God. Satan said that will not delude many, for they know that there is a God. The second said I will tell them there is no hell. Satan answered, you will deceive no one that way; men know that even now that there is a hell for sin. The third said. I will tell men there is no hurry.

Go, said Satan, and you will ruin them by the thousand.

The most dangerous of all delusions is that there is plenty of time. The most dangerous day in a man's life is when he learns that there is such a word as . There are things which must not be put off, for no man knows if for him tomorrow will ever come."

When Jesus says that the coming of the kingdom will be like it was in Noah's day, he's talking about there being the same distractions then as there are now and will be - eating and drinking and marrying. Not that these things are bad but we can let them be all consuming. They're signs of a consumer culture which wants to distract us into thinking that this is all there is and things are scarce so you've got to grab a bargain when you see it and you've got to keep buying stuff in order to keep the whole system going. This is why we have things like Black Friday, which apparently now goes on for 8 days.

So it takes conscious effort to pull away from these consumer pressures and draw aside and be present with God in order to stay in a state of readiness for the kingdom. Such a drawing aside is in itself an act of worship. Paying attention to the voice of love is crucial amidst the noise of our culture.

A failure to pay attention to what really matters leaves us in a state of unpreparedness and it's so easy to do in our culture which is built on consumerism, individualism and secularism.

Jesus spoke of a different kingdom, a different economy, a gift economy, and Christ is the gift and the power behind the coming of that kingdom which has already begun and whose advancement we are invited to take part in and make happen.

[SLIDE] Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, and John McKnight have written a book about this, called, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*.

The book claims to help take us out of a culture of addictive consumption into a place where life is ours to create together. This satisfying way depends upon a neighbourly covenant—an agreement that we together, will better raise our children, be healthy, be connected, be safe, and provide a livelihood. The neighbourly covenant has a different language than market-hype. It speaks instead in a sacred tongue.

It's a simple idea which seeks to act out the Gospel through showing no favouritism and aims at leaving no one behind or outside. It's about creating neighbourliness and cooperating locally, even sourcing local food and other products as much as possible. It's about holding all things in common and working for common wealth or the common good. And they recognise that this is essentially about communal worship together which Jesus might have described as good neighbourliness.

Rather than measuring a country's wealth by its GDP it floats the idea of measuring how wealthy we are by using a well being index or something called time banking, where every hour where someone spends caring for someone else is added into the equation; and by that measure, the economy might look a bit more like the kingdom of God. Because (I think) for every hour we care we encounter Christ and see the kingdom of God come closer.

[SLIDE] I'm not suggesting we do any of this but what strikes me is the opportunities that we have to create together something of the kingdom of God; merely by our being together and our loving one another in whatever way we can, and celebrating the gift of Christ life that we each have.

So to answer the question is the kingdom coming soon? The answer must be, 'well no one knows only God the Father' but in the meantime we're going to pray and work for its coming in whatever ways Christ is leading us. There's much to be excited about in the days ahead.