

Advent 1, Eucharist
Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-end and Matthew 24:36-44
Father Christopher

Does anyone know what the average attention span is in this country? Well, a recent study suggested that it is 6 seconds. 6 seconds. How do you think, or wait, or look, let alone read a book, if you can't concentrate for more than 6 seconds? And yet it's not that surprising is it? How many of us, while waiting for a bus, get our phones out to quickly check our e-mail, our Instagram, our Facebook, our Whatsapp? Maybe not all of you, but most of us.

Yet watching and waiting requires a totally different state. It requires us to be alert, but also to be open, to be open to what God has in store for us. And so it is both active, attending to God, and to what is around us; and yet also not in control, and being fine with that.

'Brothers and sisters, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.' That sleep might not be sleep as we tend to think of it, but could be our petty business. In the constant, minor, largely meaningless activity that we are often engaged in, are we not actually asleep much of the time?

St Paul goes on, *'For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.'* And yet, how would we notice our salvation when so bound up in rubbish? In trivia?

I say this as someone who is as bad as the rest of us. Would I notice God coming into the world as a little baby in some distant town? I highly doubt it – I would not be as discerning as those magi, searching, following the star as it glinted, drawing them on.

'About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor [even] the Son, but only the Father.'

We are told that we will be in the midst of our busy-ness; eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, just as when the flood came.

'Keep awake, ... for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.'

You might think, well, this is all fine and dandy, but we know when Jesus came, and while St Paul might have been expecting Him to return any day, He hasn't come yet, in 2,000 years; and the church doesn't *really* still believe in the Second Coming does it?

Well, there are different views on the Second Coming: you may take it literally, believing that Jesus will come at the end of time; and it *could* come during our lifetime; and yet that seems rather unlikely. So we can relax a bit, can't we?

That is a perfectly understandable, natural response; and it is the one that St Matthew in his gospel was dealing with. People had expected Jesus to return within the first few years, as St Paul still does in his letter to the Romans, probably written about 20 years after the death of Jesus.

Hence his, *'make no provision for the flesh.'* Why should you, when Jesus is coming back soon?

And yet by the time St Matthew wrote his gospel, probably at least 40 years after Jesus's death, people had grown complacent: Jesus had not come back yet.

And so, compared with the other gospels, St Matthew's account is far more interested in the attitude that Christians should live with. What does it mean to live expectantly?

It's one thing not to make provision for the flesh, but if the expectation of Jesus's immediate return is slipping, we still have to think about how to live our lives. And Jesus tells us to *'Keep awake'*.

And we are to keep awake, not just to wait for the Second Coming, but to discern signs of God's presence, or signs of God's new creation. And looking for signs of God at work is very similar to looking for the coming of Jesus, of looking for the slight, twinkling light of the star in the darkness of the desert sky.

It is looking for signs of compassion in our world; looking for gestures of mercy and generosity to those who most need it; it is looking for signs of hope in situations and lives that seem hopeless.

I am not suggesting that we live in Pollyanna-ish optimism, blind to the evil in our world; far from it. We are also to see signs of evil: to notice lack of integrity in those in positions of power in the world, and not to compromise the high standards that we hold to as Christians; to stand up against the bully and those who would disregard the weakest in our society; and to be alert to our own complicity by failing to care for others and to further the kingdom as we ought.

But we are fundamentally a people of hope. And while not being blind to evil, we are called, particularly in Advent, to look for shoots of hope. To do that we need to still ourselves in prayer, to find that space to see, and to be properly awake.

And then we will find God in the darkness of our world. In my curacy I used to find the levels of pain people shared with me very hard, and I still remember one morning when I was feeling particularly depressed about everything I had encountered that week; trudging along a little hopelessly. But two things happened, and both in the same road: Firstly, on my way with Cuthbert to the park after Morning Prayer, the bin man carrying a bin in front of me smiled and said good morning. I smiled back, and said how nice it was to see a smile first thing in the morning. We got talking, and he told me about his struggle with depression, and that he has found that the only thing he can do to fight it is to smile. And with that he got on with his work.

And secondly, on my way back from the park, I saw someone for whom I had prayed that morning in Morning Prayer, who has lost her partner. She smiled too, and her young child played with Cuthbert.

Two tiny things, and yet they were both clear signs of God's new creation, of the kingdom of God, in our midst. And they sustained me throughout the rest of the day. I could give you a long list of similar instances. But *that, that* is what the kingdom of God looks like. It comes when we do not expect it, in small things; but we have to be alert, to have our eyes open; and to receive it; to receive *Him*.

Are you open to the kingdom of God; to the gift of hope; to waiting?
'Keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.'