

PREPARE! HOW?

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Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

We all know how to prepare for Christmas. Most of us say every year that we didn't do it right - that we ran out of shopping days, or that in the busy-ness of the end of the year that we didn't leave enough time for the things we said last year we were going to do this year - but we all have an idea in our head of how it should be done.

The season of Advent is about preparing for the truth of Christmas, the fact that Christ is coming into the world. It's about expectation, about hope, about getting us ready. But what we are preparing for is bigger than the arrival of a baby and bigger than the cycle of parties, it's even bigger than the tension that sometimes surrounds the annual Christmas family reunion.

What we are preparing for is the coming of the Christ, not just the annual celebration of his birth in Bethlehem, but also the coming of Christ in the fulfilment of his reign here on earth. And although we might have some idea how to ensure that we are ready for the Christmas celebrations, most of us are less sure about how to be ready for the coming of the Christ. How do we prepare? What should we be doing?

In the gospel for today, Jesus described the day of his coming as being like the days of Noah and the flood. That is to say that it will be a cataclysmic change, a day that comes suddenly and changes everything, whether you're ready for it or not. But it is also a day that cannot be predicted - Jesus said that he didn't even know himself when it would be, so there is certainly no point in taking any notice of those who start suggesting dates. So how do we prepare for this unexpected cataclysmic event?

There are the clichéd lines about living every day as though it were the day and one day you'll be right, but even if you could know that it was tomorrow, that doesn't in itself tell you how to prepare for it.

Many years ago I remember a preacher saying, "What would I do if I knew it was tomorrow? I'd finish my day at the office. I'd go home and love my wife. I'd take the dog for a walk with the kids. I'd do all the things that I normally consider to be part of a healthy Christian life, because that's how I would want Christ to find me living." That idea has stuck with me. It is one possible response to the idea of living each day as though it were the last. We just go about our business and live right.

There was another saying, something about pray like you'll die tomorrow and work like you'll live a thousand years. The God made known in Jesus is not just a God of the big events but also a God of the cycles of birth and life and death, and we are called to invest ourselves in the world as though it would last forever. But our gospel reading causes us a big problem with the idea of just going about our business, because it uses that as the example of how not to live. It says that in the days of Noah people did that - went on eating, drinking, getting married, having children, doing the laundry etc. right up to the moment the flood hit. Going about their business not only

failed to prepare them, but it left them vulnerable and they were lost as a result.

Some people take an alternative approach to preparing for the day, taking their cue from this sense of impending cataclysm. Many of these people are not consciously religious, but are motivated by a strong sense of impending peril. You can see many of them in the anti-nuclear and environmental movements. And what they are doing is a perfectly reasonable response both to the message of this gospel reading and to the clear evidence that we are creating a global catastrophe. What is the point of eating, drinking, getting married, studying for exams, and tidying the house if it could all be obliterated tomorrow? The call is issued then, to put everything else on hold while we fight these causes. Nothing means anything much while the bomb still hangs over it. Why raise children if they are just going to be fried in a global greenhouse? There are people who totally dedicate themselves to bringing about nuclear disarmament or to ending all greenhouse emissions or to stopping all rain forest logging. They quit their jobs, give up the possibility of having families, abandon all the comforts and securities, and work long hours voluntarily for Greenpeace or some other worthwhile organisation. They intend to go back to normal life only if and when the cause is won and the world is safe to live a normal life in. I have admiration for their single-minded commitment.

But I'm not convinced that that was the response that Jesus was calling us to. For one thing it is such a negative focus that it can fail to prepare us for life after the victory. Even if we eliminate all nuclear weapons, we haven't automatically eliminated the attitude that produced them in the first place and could do so again at relatively short notice. Even if consumer boycotts stop the slaughter of the whales, we may still be left with a global economic system that measures life, beauty and the environment in terms of dollars and marketability.

And furthermore there is a certain idolatry in the attitude that says we hold our destiny entirely in our own hands - that our bomb, or our fluorocarbons, or our activism will determine the future of the universe. And it ends up with us living in fear. Our lives become shaped by the fear of the threatened destruction, and everything is shaped around that fear. And movements based on fear and an all-encompassing cause frequently become totalitarian. Nothing can be enjoyed for its own sake any more but only as it contributes to the cause. There are enough political movements in history that have gone that way!

Those who focus on the coming of Christ instead of on the risk of destruction often advocate a total dedication to personal piety and evangelistic mission. There is often a strong focus on issues of judgment and punishment, heaven and hell, and a desperate evangelistic endeavour to get as many people saved as quick as possible. You've probably all heard people ask the question about what you would want Christ to find you doing when he comes. Praying rather than partying. Reading the bible rather than watching TV. Evangelising rather than socialising.

Now, while I don't want to ridicule any of those activities, I wonder whether that attitude is actually much different from its non-religious equivalent. The driving force is still fear. Fear of what will happen to me if I'm caught at the wrong moment, and fear of what will happen to others if I don't evangelise enough. It's like the house owner in Jesus' illustration who keeps watch against the burglar but is always afraid

that the moment they sleep, the burglar will come. And I for one am not convinced that life shaped by fear of God's punishment is that much better than life shaped by the fear of some other evil. Christ's love is supposed to drive out fear, not just focus it in a new way.

There must be another way. Jesus made it quite clear that our destiny was not simply a matter of what we are doing when the day and the hour come. Two men will be working in a field. One is taken, one isn't. Two women will be grinding flour together. One will be taken, one will be left. It's got nothing to do with what you are doing at that moment. Something else determines whether you are ready or not.

Something that the apostle Paul describes as living in the light. "Night is almost over, and day will soon appear," he says, "so we must stop living as people do in the dark, and be ready to live in the light."

What that suggests to me is that in significant ways we should be living as though the expected coming had already happened. The way to prepare for the time when something will be true is to live as though it were true, and in many ways it is true anyway. What is it we are waiting for - the reign of Christ? Does Christ reign now? Yes. The reign of Christ has begun. It is not as complete as it will be, but we can live under the reign of Christ now. And if we are living under the reign of Christ all the time now, we will have no worries about whether we will be ready for the coming reign of Christ.

And as Paul says, now is the time to make up your mind. You have to take the opportunity as it presents itself, because it may be that things are only going to get worse and that if you're not living in the light now you will find it even harder tomorrow. It's no use waiting for a better time because there may not be one.

It's essentially a matter of openness, of willingness to change or be moved as the Spirit moves. I don't think that those two men working together got taken or left behind because God only wanted one of them. It was more like the wind of God's Spirit moved through and one of them got caught up in it while the other clung rigidly to the ways he'd always been in. The moment of change comes and one will be caught up in the new creation and one will be left desperately clinging to the old and unprepared to be caught up by the wind of God's Spirit. Two women will be grinding flour together, and though no-one could tell the difference, one will be caught up by the breath of God and be transformed into the likeness of the Risen Christ, the other will be left breathing the stale polluted air of the dying world, unwilling to be moved or changed. One was living as though Christ reigned now, and so when Christ said "now", she went.

The contrast could not be stronger. We live in fear of the future, terrified of the prospect of catastrophe or punishment, or we live in confident expectation, longing for the day when the love that Christ showers on us will encompass the whole world. When we live with that hope, with the confidence that the coming Christ is the same Christ who has embraced us and set us free to live, then we can celebrate and party with meaning.

I know Paul sounded a bit down on partying in the reading from Romans but I'm pretty sure that what he was rejecting was the kind of partying that is just a tragic attempt to avoid reality for a while, to stave off despair. You know the difference. There is always a big difference between the party you're invited to because someone wants to celebrate an engagement or a new baby or the end of exams – and the party where someone rings up and says "I was feeling a bit depressed so I thought I'd have a party." One's a genuine spirited celebration, the other is a hollow charade hiding from the truth.

With Christ as our leader now, we can live and celebrate life and love, in confident expectation of a beautiful future shaped by the same God who laid down his life in his intense love for us, and rose again to lead us all beyond fear and tragedy into the new age of love, life, hope and peace. It is this Christ who is coming, and if we are living in his love and shaped by his love, then unlike the people of Noah's day, we will always be ready for the fullness of his reign to break decisively into our world.