

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 76”

Matthew 24:36-51

The passage we've just read follows on from last week's teaching from Jesus. You'll remember that he's talking to his disciples, just a couple of days away from his death. (He knows that, of course, but they don't.) And he is trying to prepare them for the fact that he is going to leave them – but he will be back, and when he returns, God's Kingdom will finally come to fulfilment. When Jesus returns, all that is currently wrong with this world will be put right and God's sovereign rule will be over everything and everyone.

Last week we saw that the return of Jesus is inevitable. There is no doubt that he will come back – and that gives us a sense of hope about the eternal future. Even if things don't seem to make sense now, even if we struggle to see what is going on, even if our lives are full of difficulty and danger, it will eventually all be set to rights by a God who loves us and wants us to enjoy his presence for ever.

Now, the disciples – just like many of us, I imagine – would like to have a bit more detail about when this is all going to happen. We'd love to know when Jesus is coming back because we could then adjust our savings, our insurance, our pension schemes accordingly. And we could get on and live just as we want to now, then repent and put things right just in time for the final showdown. It would be a great help to be well informed about it all.

But Jesus now stresses the unpredictability of his return. No-one can know when it will take place. Only God the Father in heaven knows that. Even Jesus, in his self-limiting humanity, doesn't know the details. And, as we were saying last week, that means there's no point trying to work it all out. C S Lewis (in a slightly patronising way) says this in his *Letters To Malcolm*: “*We must never speak to simple and excitable people about ‘The Day’ without emphasising again and again the utter impossibility of prediction.*”

In the time of the New Testament, many people thought the return of Christ was imminent. Some of the Christians in Colosse apparently gave up their jobs to wait for it. But clearly it hasn't happened even now and the longer we wait, the less we tend to think about it. Most of us get on with life without, I suspect, giving the return of Jesus much thought at all. Every now and then we'll sing a hymn about it or read a bit from the Bible about it – as we're doing at the moment – but our lives are not greatly affected by the thought that Jesus is going to make a final return visit. Despite all that Jesus has described in vv4-28, life still goes on.

That's very much what happened in Noah's time, says Jesus. Despite the warnings that God had given, people just got on with life as if God wasn't there and the way they behaved made no difference to their future. But look what happened to them, says Jesus – and that's what it will be like when he comes back. And this next section, going on into chapter 25, is all about making sure you're ready for the inevitable, whenever it might occur. That means, as former President of the USA Jimmy Carter once said, "*We should live our lives as though Christ were coming this afternoon.*" I suspect many of us, even if we do think about it from time to time, adopt the position of Lucy in the *Peanuts* cartoon – "*The world can't end today because it's already tomorrow in some places.*" So we just get on with it all as if the future doesn't really matter.

But Jesus is very clear that we do need to be ready, to be living as God wants us to, to be making sure we attend to the details of our holy living, as he will make clear through the parables and teaching of the next chapter. Michael Green writes that, "*Jesus did not tell us to get out our calculators and polish our crystal balls, but to live a holy life in preparation for meeting him.*" There are two illustrations of that in these verses here.

Firstly, Jesus talks about a householder whose house is broken into. (Literally, the word means "*dug into*" as walls made of mud and wattle could easily just be dug through.) Of course, if the burglar had somehow given the householder a clue about when he was going to come, the householder would have been waiting for him. But criminals don't make appointments like that – they just turn up, so you need some sort of security in place all the time. So with the return of Jesus. We don't know when it's going to happen, so we need to be alert to the possibility all the time.

He then talks about a servant – a slave, actually. He knows that he has certain duties to fulfil for his master and while the master isn't there he can either get on and do them conscientiously, just as he would if the master were present – in which case the master will reward him when he comes back unexpectedly – or he can get on and have fun, abusing his privileges and his fellow-slaves while he's at it – in which case he is in deep trouble when his master returns and finds him at it. The clear implication is that those who claim to follow Jesus need to be living as he wants them to while he is physically absent from them, so that when his return does finally take place he will be pleased with them and grant them their deserved reward.

As those who claim to follow Jesus here this morning – and, indeed, those who have yet to make up their minds – we need to be aware of just what is in store for us. In Jesus we have an amazing hope for the eternal future – that promise of being part of God's renewed and restored creation under his benevolent rule: being part of his Kingdom. Those who reject Jesus do not have that prospect, the Bible teaches. But

we need to be starting to live that out now, acknowledging the Kingship of Jesus, the rule of God in our lives. We need to make the most of this world here and now, living in accordance with God's ways and aware that Jesus could return at any time.

You see, when Jesus does come again, when this world order has run its course, the effects will be radical and permanent. Jesus talks of division and separation as friends and family suddenly find themselves parted for ever – whether they are working in the mill or cultivating the fields. And the scrutiny that we will all have to face before our Creator God – as we'll discover in chapter 25 – will be pretty tough.

The question that we are once again left with, I suppose, is whether we are prepared to gamble on what Jesus says not being true. Are you prepared to live your life with no thought as to the return of Jesus – totally unprepared for it and content just to get on and live your life as you want to? Or do you want to accept what Jesus teaches and live your life according to that, so that when he does return he will be pleased with you and lead you into his eternal reward? We can't be sure when it will be, but Jesus has promised to return. We need to live each day of our lives in the light of that.

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This passage follows on from Jesus' teaching in the first part of chapter 24. He is trying to prepare his disciples for the fact that he is going to leave them – but he will be back, and when he returns, God's Kingdom will finally come to fulfilment. When Jesus returns, all that is currently wrong with this world will be put right and God's sovereign rule will be over everything and everyone.

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But Jesus is very clear that we do need to be ready. Firstly, Jesus talks about a householder whose house is broken into. Criminals don't make appointments like that – they just turn up, so you need some sort of security in place all the time. So with the return of Jesus. We don't know when it's going to happen, so we need to be alert to the possibility all the time.

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In Jesus we have an amazing hope for the eternal future. But we need to be starting to live that out now, acknowledging the Kingship of Jesus, the rule of God in our lives. We need to make the most of this world here and now, living in accordance with God's ways and aware that Jesus could return at any time.

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you think *v40* is a literal description of what will happen? Why/why not?
2. How can we be ready for the return of Jesus?
3. Do the rewards and judgements described in *v47 & 51* apply to Christians? Why/why not?

4. What excites you most about the return of Jesus?

5. What scares you most about the return of Jesus? How can we face his return without fear?