

**Mark 13:24-37****Keep watch**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the themes of the Advent season is watching and waiting. But what exactly are we watching for? And what are we waiting for? The second question has an easy answer – we are waiting for Jesus. Waiting for his return to bring all things to their fulfilment. The first question, though, is a little less clear. Some people like to make a big deal of watching for certain signs and using them to determine when Christ will return. But Jesus makes it very clear – no one knows the day or hour. He uses the example of the master of the house leaving on a journey, and his servants working and watching and waiting for his return. In contrast to the certainty of the fig blossom is the unpredictable suddenness of this travelling homeowner.

The servants must keep awake because they don't know when the master will return. They are charged to work and watch, and not to be found asleep. But what happens when the return is delayed? The longer the delay, the more likely the servants become complacent or slack or even distracted. If that's the case, they will be surprised and totally unprepared for the master's return. And notice the four times Jesus gives: the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. These are all times of varying darkness. Not one of them is in the day.

So, the watching happens in the darkness. And this implies that it's watching out for the sort of things that can happen in the dark. When we consider the other places in scripture that use this idea of darkness, it's almost always related to sin and evil. So, what I see here is that Jesus is calling his disciples to pay attention, to keep watch over yourselves, that you're not led astray. Watch out for deception. Watch out during the days ahead that will be filled with all sorts of challenges.

Whatever difficulties you are faced with, whatever is seemingly wrong with the world, stay alert to the things of God. Remember, Jesus is saying this to a group of disciples that struggles to see Jesus for who he truly is. Their tendency towards ignorance in the midst of divine activity is a dominant theme in Mark's Gospel. So often they do not recognise Jesus for who he really is, even while believing that he is the Messiah. And implicit in his urging them to stay alert, is a warning against welcoming a false return of the master.

Just before our reading today, Jesus had warned about false Messiahs and false prophets who would come with similar signs and miracles to his own. This is similar to Revelation chapter 13, where great signs are performed that cause people to worship an evil beast instead of the Lamb upon the throne. In both cases, there is a need to know the true God and be able to discern the source of spiritual power and authority. This is why the disciples need a warning and an encouragement.

That which is false, which is evil, which could lead us astray, can all too often have an appearance of what is good. To be alert and keep awake is not just about not knowing the time of Christ's return. It is to be watchful and discerning, especially when chaos and darkness abound, and so many things can lead us astray. And one way that we might not be aware of, it that because God took on human flesh, we find it very easy to recreate God in our own image. It becomes all too easy to make God like us, to look for God in human ways and human forms, and to hold God to our standards. And so, we are also watching that we don't fall into such a trap.

God did make himself known to us in human form, and this is a huge theme in Mark's gospel. The beginning and end of Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel account are delineated by the Greek word *schizo* which means to tear apart. At his baptism by John in the Jordan, the heavens are torn apart as the Father speaks. And as he died on the cross, the curtain in the temple is torn apart, opening up the holy of holies. Anything that can be simply 'opened' can be easily shut again and we would never know it happened. But the incarnate Jesus has fundamentally changed the way we can relate to God. That which separates us from God, either the heavens or the holy of holies, has been torn apart and can never go back to the way it was before. Lest we think that God can be let out for a little while but when we've had enough put back behind closed doors, Mark's Gospel rips that image apart. This means that there is no keeping God at a distance anymore and that God is not and will not be where we expect to find him. And this is all the more reason to be alert and awake to the realities of the kingdom of heaven.

And so, we enter this Advent season with a threefold call to watch, to wait, and to work. Working in God's kingdom can be difficult. Waiting on God's timing can be hard. Not knowing the day or the hour means we should always be prepared. If we know the when, we might delay our preparations until they become necessary, and then get caught short. But the precise timing of what is to come is irrelevant. Preparedness for what is to come is what matters.

And so, we need to live as though the end is at hand, and we need to be ready for the long haul because the timetable is known only to God. And we may not know what is to come, but we certainly know Who is to come. Amidst the usual frenzy of this time of year, complicated by a pandemic as well, Jesus calls us to keep watch over ourselves lest we lose our way. If we keep our focus on him, on the one who will return to bring all things their fulfilment, then the when and the how don't really matter.

We are waiting for Jesus, but because we already belong to him, because we know he has defeated sin and death, our waiting is filled with confidence and hope. And I pray this hope is a reality in your life this Advent season, as we again prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour, in whom we have a sure and certain hope, and eternal joy. Amen.

May God who is eternally faithful, give you his peace which passes all human understanding, and keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus, until he comes again as victorious Lord of all. Amen.