

Of the two main Christian festivals, namely Easter and Christmas; the western world makes more of celebrating Christmas even although Easter is more important event for Christians. Perhaps the reason that Christmas is the bigger event is because it's traditions have been mixed with paganism with Christmas trees, presents, parties and food traditions. And Christmas seems to have the bigger build up, when children count the days until Santa comes, and adults get prepared to celebrate that one day. There is a sense of anticipation to Christmas that Easter seems to lack for many people. But this was not always the case and I believe we should recapture that sense that something wonderful was about to happen to make our Easter celebrations more poignant. Easter should be exciting!

This sense that something is about to happen was something the first believers would have experienced. Those first followers of Christ would have recognized this anticipation as one of the marks of the true church. They were convinced they stood on the precipice of history and that something amazing was about to happen. For the world that Jesus inhabited, time lumbered on with Roman occupation and corrupt religious leaders subjugating them, but now the early Christian community sensed things were moving. They sensed that their future was stirring and something new would be upon them.

What was it that was about to happen? Their attempts to describe it pushed the boundaries of their language, just as it challenges our contemporary imaginations. *The kingdom of God is at hand...The stars will fall from heaven....The night is far gone.....They will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory....This age is passing away....Come, Lord Jesus.* The church lived in expectation, waiting for this something that was going to happen. Every word that was spoken, and their actions and prayers were shaped by this coming event. These early Christians who lived on the margins of their society were confidently awaiting this event. It was exciting!

We have all known the energy that an eagerly anticipated future can give to our actions in the present, and there is excitement in preparing for something new. We are in the middle of Holy Week and the events of Maundy Thursday with the Last Supper and Jesus' arrest is still to come. We have still to face the events that mark Jesus' Passion with His crucifixion. If we were living in the same time frame as Jesus and these early believers, we would not know what this week would bring. We would not know what our future was or what it would hold for Jesus. We had great expectations for our Messiah to bring about a new world order, but by the end of this week our hopes would be cruelly dashed.

I think the church has always struggled with its pain over a future which fails to come. The early church prayed *Come, Lord Jesus* but it was Roman soldiers who came. *This world is passing away* they sang, but the world they knew remained. One can live in expectation for only so long before growing weary of waiting. ***If the church is standing at the threshold of God's future kingdom of justice, then the church can dare to touch the wounds of lepers and freely pour out its resources for the poor.*** If this world is surely in the throes of death and the new time of healing and mercy is close at hand, then the church can cheerfully bear rejection, endure suffering, and faithfully sing its alleluias. But if there's no God-shaped future at hand, and if nothing is about to happen; then all there is left for the church to be, is another well-meaning institution. All there is left for the church to do, is to whistle its liturgy in the dark, collect the money and keep the heating and coffee coming, because nothing is about to happen. There's nothing to get excited about.

Even the second generation of Christians who formed the early church were not immune to this loss of faith in the coming kingdom of God. In the beginning, a passionate hope kept expectations high that Jesus' return would be immanent, but as the days wore on and the living memories of Jesus faded and the persecution of the church increased; their expectations began to wane.

The Apostle Paul captured the vibrant anticipation of those early Christians when he said: *The appointed time has grown very short* but for those early Christians and all those who followed them it seemed that *Gradually the time has grown very long*.

But despite this decreasing expectation, faith has remained and the church has preserved. The church has repeated the urgency of Jesus' warning: ***Take heed and watch, for you do not know when the time will come. (Mark 13:33)***. No one warns the night watchman to *stay awake* unless he appears to be getting drowsy. Just so, the church has kept Jesus' call to watchfulness alive in their faith and in their worship, not because they didn't struggle with hope, but precisely because they had difficulty hoping! But even a warning from the lips of Jesus cannot keep us vigilant, expectant and hopeful forever. It's really difficult to *take heed and watch* no matter who tells us to do it, when nothing ever happens. The Apostle Mark must have known this, which is why he made two special notes of Jesus' words in his Gospel.

The first note is this: *Of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mark 13:32)*. God's future will not arrive when we plan it but it will come in God's time. The coming kingdom is a promise and it shouldn't be turned into a set of predictions which we be manipulated. The coming kingdom is a promise from God and it can't be turned into a political agenda, or reduced to a doctrine of progress. God does not simply provide happy endings for the futures we are engineering! God provides a future beyond our knowledge and control, and not even the angels in heaven know the hour of its coming. But even with this caution against wanting to know too much, we're still left with too little. We still have the question of how to hope in the meantime when nothing ever happens.

And this leads us to Mark's second point from chapter 13. He records a parable of Jesus about a man who went on a trip and left his servants to manage the house while he was gone.

This is a description of the situation of the church: We've been left in charge of the house while our Master is absent and we constantly need to be on the lookout. Jesus said: ***You do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight, or at cock crow or in the morning; lest he comes suddenly and find you asleep.*** (Mark 13:35-36)

Jesus is saying *Of that day or hour no one knows*, but Mark hears something more in this word. The master could come *in the evening*, and yet in the very next chapter, he tells us that *when it was evening*, Jesus ate his last meal with the disciples and tells them *one of you will betray me*. Or the master could come *at midnight*, and Mark writes that later that night while Jesus prayed his cry of anguish in the Garden of Gethsemene, the disciples weary of waiting, slept: *Could you not watch for one hour?* Jesus asked them. Perhaps the master will come *at cockcrow*, and Peter turned to the accusing maid with a curse and a denial, *I do not know this man* then the cock crowed. Maybe the master will come *in the morning*, and *as soon as it was morning*, Jesus was bound and led away to his trial and to his death. What Mark has heard in Jesus' story has been woven into the fabric of his gospel.

As the church waits expectantly for the coming kingdom, those who trust in God are having to exercise faith. Those who trust in the promise of God's coming kingdom are able to see signs of His coming all around them. Those who believe that in God's timing something is about to happen, know that something is happening already. The times we live in are already shaped by God's future and filled with its force.

I sense that something's about to happen here. I have an expectation that God will move us forward and that we will build on what has gone before. God is coming in power to the world and when we say the words: *He will come to judge the living and the dead* we give voice to the hope that our Saviour is coming: *Come Lord Jesus!*

Every time a congregation creates a clothing store or a foodbank for those in need, they do so because they live today in the light of God's tomorrow when all will be clothed in garments of light, and the banquet table of the kingdom will hold a feast. *Come, Lord Jesus!* Every time Christians speak words of forgiveness in circumstances of bitterness, words of love in situations of hatred, they are speaking in the future present tense. That is, they are using language which the whole creation will learn to speak in God's tomorrow. *Come Lord Jesus!* Every time worshipers rise to sing *Come Lord Jesus*, they are praying for and expecting something to happen. They are waiting *for someone to happen. Come Lord Jesus!*

As we begin our journey through Holy Week let's be expectant that something is about to happen. Lets shake off the disappointments of the past and keep in mind that God has promised that he will come again. It was Jesus who said to those first disciples, and says to us today: *What I say to you I say to all; watch! Come Lord Jesus! Amen.*

(1700 words)

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