

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Matthew 24:36-44 (EHV)

³⁶ Jesus said: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

⁴² Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so that we may keep alert and watchful for the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wouldn't it be great if none of us ever had any problems in life!

I mean, imagine none of us ever getting sick, or old, or experiencing cancer or dementia. Imagine no accidents on the road with their mounting death toll. Imagine no earthquakes or tsunamis. Imagine no break-ins, pandemics, or people taking advantage of others. Imagine no war or terrorism. Imagine no violence or abuse in people's homes and communities.

Wouldn't that be nice?

But you and I know this doesn't happen. This isn't a realistic wish!

However, sometimes we're tempted to live as if none of these things will ever happen to us. We fool ourselves into thinking it's always going to happen to someone else. Then, if any of these things do happen to us, we feel unprepared. If we knew beforehand any of these things would happen to us, then we may have made different choices!

The images Jesus uses in today's reading is of people who live in regret following the Son's return. Even if they were warned it this was going to happen, they weren't prepared. It caught them off guard. Hindsight, like always, came too late.

He uses a few examples to get his point across, such as the people who lived at the time of Noah. They had ignored God's warnings and did their own thing. Perhaps they thought God used empty threats. Maybe they thought God wasn't real. It could be they reckoned nothing was ever going to happen to them and lived their lives accordingly.

But when those floods came, it was too late to do anything about the way they lived. It was too late to say 'sorry' or change their ways. It was too late to change God's mind. Most people died during the days of the Flood.

On the other hand, Noah had listened to God and heeded his words. He was ready. His trust in, and obedience to, God's words, meant he was safe.

Next Jesus uses the image of two workers in the field or two women grinding grain. He mentions no obvious difference between them. They may both be good people, but one is taken and the other left. Would the one left behind regret their actions or inactions? Unfortunately, by the time those left behind realised this, it's too late to do anything about it. There's no court of appeal.

Jesus also uses the image of a burglary. Most of us think it's never going to happen to us, but sometimes it does. If only we knew the thief was coming we'd be better prepared. If only we had locked that window or door. If only we had hidden our belongings more wisely. If only! Those two words weigh heavy with regret. Hindsight comes too late again.

Jesus is warning us this is what it's going to be like when the Son returns again. There'll be no warning except what he's already told us, and few will take notice of these words of caution.

Jesus describes two starkly different reactions to this event. For those expecting and watching for his return, there'll be safety and peace, but for the others, God will come like a thief.

And for some people, that's their view of God already. For them, God comes like a thief and steals from them. They accuse him of stealing their loved ones before their time. They accuse him of causing suffering and sickness. They accuse him of stealing all their fun because he doesn't allow them to live like everyone else. They accuse him of being too judgmental and too unloving. They accuse him of inaction by not stopping wars or accidents or acts of terror. But unless they listen to his words of warning and his words of forgiveness and peace, their fears will one day come true, and God will indeed come like a thief. And it will be too late.

The warning for us as Christians is that we're to expect his return at any time. He's told us he's coming back. He's warned us to keep watch for him and expect him at any time.

Unfortunately, many have already abandoned their watching posts. We may even know some of them!

Perhaps they missed a Sunday or three, which turned into twelve, and so on. Perhaps they still believe in God but became disillusioned with their experiences in church. Maybe they think they'll receive plenty of warning. Maybe they think God will just let everyone into his kingdom, whether they believe in him or not. Perhaps they no longer believe.

Whatever the reason, they've stopped listening to his words. They no longer want to be in his presence in worship or receive his holy gifts. Because Jesus has already taken so long to return, they've stopped expecting him to come back during their lifetime. They've become distracted by the devil's whispers, the world's lies, and their own selfish desires.

But what about each of us?

Sure, we're all here in worship today, but do each of us really expect him to return at any time, or have we

too become a bit apathetic and complacent about his return? Will we be prepared for his return at any time?

After all, we're not told Jesus *might* come back. We're told he *will* come back. We don't watch *just in case* he returns, but we keep watching and waiting because we know *he will* return. It's not 'if', but 'when'. And the 'when' could be anytime!

The Day when Jesus returns is that Day when Jesus comes at the end of time. Yet it's also possible our own day of death could be that Day for us when Jesus comes for us, one by one. Since we don't know the day or time of our own death, will we be ready?

Therefore, Jesus tells us all to stay alert and watchful. We're to expect him to come back at a time we'll least expect him.

The best way for us to stay alert and watchful is by being in those places we know *he already comes* through his Word and Sacraments in worship. This is where he'll continue to warn us and comfort us. By doing this, we're assured God won't come as a thief, but as a welcome Lord and Saviour.

In some ways, we may think of our worship services as a kind of watching post, where we watch and wait for Jesus to come.

Here in worship, we hear that he has come, that he still comes to us in his Word and in his holy Sacraments, and that he will come again.

For starters, we know and believe he did come as our God in human flesh. He did die on the cross for the forgiveness of all our sins. He was buried in the grave. He did rise again from death. He has ascended into heaven. These things we confess in our Creeds.

But while he's still seated at his Father's side, he still comes to us today.

He comes to us through the Bible readings. After all, the Old Testament readings point to our coming Saviour and tells us what to look for in a Saviour. The Gospel readings tell us what our Saviour said and did once he came which fulfilled what the Old Testament told us to look for. And the Epistle readings explain what all this means for us in our daily lives and in the life of the Church as we wait for him to come again on the last Day.

But just going through the motions of listening to the Bible readings without understanding what God is truly saying to us may not be enough. After all, *listening* to a warning doesn't lead us to safety. *Responding* to that warning by acting accordingly will lead us to safety. So, we not only *listen* to God's word and their meaning for us, but we *respond* in faith.

As we're alert to his coming right now, we appreciate how he comes to us again today to pronounce all our sins are forgiven in his name. We believe his words of forgiveness are true and trustworthy, even when spoken by his authorised representatives. These words of forgiveness assures us when he comes again for us, he comes in peace to take us to be with him.

He also comes to us through his holy meal. Through his forgiving and life-giving body and blood he comes to strengthen our faith, to assure us that our sins are indeed forgiven, and to pass on his gracious and merciful nature to us as we receive him into our bodies through faith.

Lastly, he promises he will come again, and no-one knows when that will be, not even the angels in heaven.

Since we don't know when he'll return, we're to keep alert in our watching and waiting.

Jesus will come unexpectedly, but he warns us some won't be ready.

Will Jesus come like a thief so that we live in regret for an eternity?

Or will we trust he'll say something like this to us: "Yes, you are mine and I love you. I've adopted you as my own and I won't let you go. I've paid dearly for you with my own precious blood. Come and live with me in safety and peace."

Then, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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