

Mt 24

Here at Bloomsbury, we follow a lectionary – a divinely ordained set of bible passages appropriate to specific days and weeks of the year.

But... What do you do when the lectionary gives you a passage to preach upon – which happens to be a passage you don't understand? Answer – you seek refuge in one of the other passages that the lectionary also gives you for this week. But the trouble with the reading from Matthew – is not that I don't understand it. The words make sense, the context makes sense.

The context is the inevitable fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man. That does not necessarily, although it may refer to, the second coming of Jesus. But more likely, it seems to me, is the Old Testament Idea of the Day of the Lord. We hear it time and again throughout the prophets – the day of the Lord, the day of the Lord – the day of judgement. And always and invariably, the prophets warn people that the day of judgement is not something to look forward to, because ... it is the Day when an army pitches up, a pagan army, and on God's behalf, inflicts catastrophe upon the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside.

And so, when Jesus talks about the coming of the Son of Man – there is something similar at work, I think. In fact, no one ever refers to Jesus as the Son of Man, but Jesus himself. The Son of Man – the only member of the Trinity to have become the son of a man. The true heir of all that a human being should be – personified in one man, the son of Man. And the coming of the Son of Man – is to do with the world being set to rights. And how does that start? With the rebels against the Roman empire being taken and murdered.

If you've been overfed on books like the Left Behind series, you will know – of course – that we are talking about the Rapture. You know the rapture – is when God unzips the sky, plucks all the Christian believers from the corners of the earth, and puts Satan in charge and leaves everyone to their own devices. The rapture – a very modern American invention.

In fact, the Simpsons captures the doctrine of the rapture perfectly! Bart – personifies all that is bad and naughty and wrong with a young, modern western boy. And his father, Homer, is awakened one morning by workmen outside – and is convinced it is the Rapture, the second coming of Christ. So he jumps out of bed in a panic, and shouts, "Oh No – it's the rapture. Quick, Hide Bart before God gets here."

I suppose today's passage is also behind the American bumper sticker that declares: "Jesus is coming: Look Busy."

So it's difficult to read today's reading about the coming of the Son of Man – without being distracted by the nonsense that this passage has accumulated over the years. And I think, since I've been at Bloomsbury – I've spent long enough talking about how this refers principally to the Romans coming – arresting the rebels, destroying the temple, being an agent of God's wrath.

But still – really – in this passage there is at least a hint, of the promise (or rather the threat) that Jesus is coming back! I would love to interpret this part out of the text, and find a clever

way to turn it completely into something else. But the fact remains, that this is one of the passages of Scripture which hints at least, towards a second coming of Christ.

I guess with the range of people here, some will expect the focus to be upon denying the second coming – others will expect it to be affirmed. But this is not the place to trace the history of belief in the second coming. There are those who think that because Jesus didn't come back quickly, the writers of scripture must have been mistaken. There are those who interpret it as a spiritual, or mystic return. There are those who think that the Messiah returns progressively, as history brings us to an ever more godly way of being. More recently there are those who believe that the coming of the Messiah is an important belief for every age, because it keeps us alert, striving for something. As one French philosopher said recently, "if the Messiah actually showed up, it would ruin everything."

And it does seem to be the case that the more comfortable we are, the less we long for the return of Christ. The only time I prayed each day for Jesus to come again – was in my basic training in the military – where you would wake every day wondering what kind of atrocity awaited you. But the more comfortable we get, the less comfortable we are with the idea of a Messiah actually pitching up and ruining everything.

But this is a big question: What does it mean, really, to long for the second coming! Having just entered the season of Advent – we are supposed to be looking for the coming of Christ. But really, what does that mean for us, when so many of us live in situations of comfort beyond the imagination of most Christians throughout history?

In the modern age, humanity has become mortal. Many from this church, for instance, were involved in Nuclear protests several years ago. We now have the capacity to destroy the planet several times over – and there are many who believe that a crisis such as a nuclear war would precipitate the Second Coming.

More recently, we are becoming aware of the issues surrounding Climate Chaos – the uncertainty of knowing what the future will hold for our planet – whether life at all will be sustainable on this planet, now that it is heating up beyond any hot point in recorded history. Maybe Christ himself will intervene. As it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be...

I wonder if history will look at our generation's sheer complacency in the light of Climate Chaos and marvel at how we just carried on with our normal, carbon-hungry living – as it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be...

We are now, officially, in the season of Advent – where ministers struggle to find enough Advent hymns without repetition, without trespassing on Christmas and still being seasonal. But advent is where the church actively seeks and longs for the coming of Christ. And the question I want to ask is – if we really want to look for the second coming, if we really have not become so comfortable we don't actually want it, how do we look. How do we stay ready and alert? How do we do that this text says we should do?

I suppose the answer is a very simple one! It means inviting Christ into the whole of our lives and the whole of our church, here and now. And inviting Christ in, in such a way, that if he actually came he could ruin everything! Our goals and our schemes and our values and our beliefs. Inviting Christ into our lives will always through those things into chaos! And if we like everything to be tight, and clear, and ordered and according to plan – the arrival of Christ

– is likely to be disruptive, and disorienting and awaken insecurity, and fear and frustration. But that is not the end of the story.

One of the powerful, atheist arguments against Christianity at the moment comes from a prominent figure called Christopher Hitchens. Now, already, and in many ways – Hitchens' arguments are weaker than they sound, because they are all based upon a pretty closed – “we've got it all stitched up”, Enlightenment way of looking at the universe. But leaving that aside, his great sound bite is this: believing in God, means believing that you are born sick and ordered to be well.

In other words – the base belief is that our lives are messed up, and we have a responsibility to fix them. And if we don't – we face the wrath of a malicious, divine Dictator. And, as with all sound bites, there are elements of this that are true, and many forms of Christian evangelism which seem to justify this cynical view of the world.

But many people in our world, do feel that we have been born sick. Do feel that we are thrown into a world of unfairness and injustice and we are powerless to do much about it. And we might want to say, at Bloomsbury, that we care about injustice and are striving to change the world. But really ... we do the marches and the campaigns and the protests. And there is a sense, in Britain, in which the age of the protest is over. After the biggest demonstration in Britain ever in 2003, the government nodded its head, thanked us for expressing our opinion – and then completely ignored us.

And increasingly, political commentators tell us that – today – political campaigning can almost be egotistical – claiming our right to be heard – rather than driving seriously to change the world. To do the latter – one journalist claims – will mean some form of civil disobedience – some form of confrontation – that may land us in serious trouble. Let's not claim to be radical, if we are not seriously committed the cause for which we protest. In fact, one of our members has been arrested for peaceful campaigning on an airport runway. Another has been in confrontation with Police and other authorities. Another is offered themselves to spend time in one of the most dangerous places on the planet – and these are expressions of radical commitment.

All peaceful, and all working in a sick world with the hope of making it well. And it is precisely this form of life that is thoroughly in tune with the call of a Jesus. This Jesus who called himself the son of man – because he gave us a vision of what human life in the world really is. And for those who find Jesus in working to see his vision come to life – his coming will only be welcome.

Those who know their lives are broken. Those who, not just in liturgies, but in life – know that they are sinners – know that they share a responsibility for the mess that the world is in – know what it is to be open – politically, personally, relationally, emotionally – to this Jesus: Those who are happy for this Jesus to come ever more fully into their lives – those who are happy for a Messiah to come and ruin everything – those are the people who can read this passage and rejoice.

And the question it leaves us is this: Not how do we understand this passage. Not how do we interpret it for the modern age. The question and challenge of this passage is nothing other than this: how do we read this and rejoice? How do we read of the coming of the Son of Man

with excitement, rather than cynicism, or dread, or unbelief. How do we read a passage like this one, as the Good News that it is?

And the answer to that question, is not a list of guidelines. Because it is a question about who we are. And if that question has any kind of practical answer – it is the question of whether we seriously engage with the Son of Man, as we encounter him, as He is in himself, here and now: in our worship, in our prayer, in our singing, in each other. Are we willing, really – to encounter the Son of Man – as he truly is – as the one who disturbs and comforts, who challenges us and makes us well, who confronts us, and heals us.

Dare we join in with that refrain of Advent liturgies: “Even so, come Lord Jesus, Amen.”