

Keep awake

The coming again of Christ, or the second coming has fascinated and absorbed people. When, where, how...the subject of endless speculation and sometimes unholy pleasure at the impending fate of unbelievers for some Christians, especially devotees of the Book of Revelation. Jehovah's Witnesses regularly announced the date of the end of the world....but it hasn't happened...yet! We now the world will end; in 1962 it seemed a real and terrifying possibility, but through nuclear war, the clock had reached seconds to midnight. Sandra and I had a friend in Birstall who was always assuring us that it was about to end because Russia's president Gorbachev bore the mark of the beast,(a prominent) birthmark. Or it's going to happen when All Jews return to Israel, etc etc. Sometimes the image of God in Jesus it suggests to me is my old headmaster at the Essex grammar School I attended. He was a strict disciplinarian and utterly humourless. My sister and I lived 15 miles away . The only train got us there very early so we were allowed to come into the building early. Mr May would suddenly appear in the room silently and unannounced. He induced a sense of guilt as you scrambled to your feet as expected.

In fact there seem to have been two strands in the NT understanding. John's gospel has no expectation of a physical return of Christ. It is accomplished with the gift of His Spirit at Pentecost. The first Christians did expect it to happen but soon had to wrestle with the fact that it hadn't happened. So what are we to make of it. If we look at Matthew's gospel, set this morning, what strikes me most is Jesus saying that no-one knows the time or hour when he will return. It hasn't stopped the speculation though. Jesus is saying speculation and spending energy on it is fruitless.

What will count if/when it happens is what we have been doing with our lives in the meantime! Just before the passage we heard he was castigating the Scribes and Pharisees for laying heavy and unnecessary burdens on their people, turning God's gracious Law into rule-keeping and using it to evade God's demands of love, justice, care for the outcast and poor and mercy. So he likens his coming to the householder who is robbed. If he'd known when it was going to happen, he would have taken the necessary precautions. Or the return of a merchant /master who has left a senior slave in charge of his household, who abuses his position and neglects his duties because the master is absent. The sudden arrival of the master unveils the state of the householder and the slave's lives. They haven't got time to pretend...it's too late, and neither have we! What counts is what /how we are living now. How Christlike we are becoming. Jesus talks about the judgment at the end as being like the separation of sheep and goats. Middle eastern sheep and goats looked very alike...behaviour was different. In Chapter 25 he says the judgment will be on how the least of God's children were treated by us, because that is where God in Christ was present amongst us. Not on our rule-keeping, religious or moral, our position in church, our respectability, but on how much love, mercy, justice and truth we showed in our lives. John of the Cross said that at the evening of our lives we shall be examined in love' That is also true of final judgment, whenever, however it happens. As that post communion prayer says, if we live with our eyes and hearts open to His presence in the unlikeliest places and people then we shall have nothing to fear from the God of Love. We shall be able to greet him not with shame or fear but with the joy of recognition and homecoming.

