

Getting Jesus clear... on his return

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[0 : 00] So the reading today is from Luke chapter 12, verses 35 to 48. Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.

Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch or in the third and finds them awake, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into.

You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Peter said, Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?

And the Lord said, Who then is the faithful and wise manager whom his master will set over his household to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.

[1 : 10] Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, My master is delayed in coming, and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.

And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating.

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand them more. Sarah, thanks so much indeed for reading.

Let me add my welcome. It's lovely to see everyone, and a lovely thought too that actually some of us will be able to meet physically next Sunday. Well, before we look at Luke chapter 12, let me pray for us.

A reminder of why Luke writes, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. Heavenly Father, we thank you for Luke's Gospel.

[2 : 27] Thank you for this opportunity this morning to consider the return of the Lord Jesus. And we pray that you would give us certainty about his return, such that we might be those who stay awake and are ready.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Well, we're starting this new series of talks in Luke's Gospel. I've called the series Getting Jesus Clear.

And today we're just looking at verses 35 to 40. So just the first part of that reading, getting Jesus clear on his return. My aim is simple.

It is that we would be ready for Jesus' return, because we know it's worth the wait. It's a good time of year, I think, to be thinking about it, because as the summer draws to an end, it is, of course, the time of the year when many of us begin to look ahead to the future.

So let me ask, what is on your horizon right now? What are the future things coming up that are occupying your mind? I guess you might be job hunting, perhaps where the horizon is either simply having a job or moving up to the next level.

[3 : 46] For some, the horizon is having a baby, where the aim is simply sleeping again. Or perhaps your health is the horizon and the aim is recovery.

Or academic or professional qualifications, where the horizon is getting the right grades. It might be romance, where the horizon is possible marriage.

Or it might be bereavement, where actually it's hard to see what the horizon is. Or perhaps for many of us, I guess for all of us, to some degree, it's simply getting back to life as normal.

Well, this morning we're coming back to this section in Luke's Gospel that we were in earlier on in the summer. Let me remind us, it stretches from chapter 10, verse 38, all the way through to chapter 13, verse 21.

It's a section of Luke's Gospel which is really all about discipleship and what it looks like to follow Jesus. Jesus makes it clear that the biggest thing he wants to be occupying our minds and filling our horizons, if we are his disciples, is his second coming.

[5 : 02] His return at the end of history, when he'll wrap up history and bring in his perfect kingdom. That's the horizon we are to have.

It's the frame of reference for our lives, if we are to be ready for his return. And if you have a copy of the outline in front of you, then you'll see that there are simply two simple points this morning.

Firstly, be ready. Be ready. Have a look again at verses 35 and 36. Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning.

And be what like wise men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Now this would have been a very familiar picture indeed to Luke's original hearers and Jesus' original listeners.

Because a wealthy master goes away for a wedding celebration. The celebrations themselves might have lasted for many days. If you then factor in the time it would have taken to get there and to come back again, then the master may well have been away for a week.

[6 : 17] And therefore the household servants need to be expectant and watchful for his return. In other words, this is a scene straight from Downton Abbey.

If you've watched the TV series, imagine Lord and Lady Grantham going away for some society engagement. They're expected back late. No one quite knows when.

And while the other servants may well have gone off to bed, faithful old Carson, the head butler, still dressed immaculately in his bow tie and tails, waits for the sound of gravel to be heard on the drive, which is his signal to go up, open the door and welcome back the master.

Now to some, of course, the very idea of Jesus Christ returning at the end of history simply sounds ridiculous. Perhaps you're listening in this morning and you're looking in on the Christian faith and this idea that Jesus will return, that he'll bring an end to this current creation, this current world, simply sounds unbelievable.

And yet it is a central doctrine of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. He rose again three days later, never to die again.

[7 : 41] He ascended to heaven where he is now enthroned in glory. And he will return as Lord and judge of all.

The point at which he will summon his people to be with him forever in the new creation, even as he brings judgment on his enemies. It is what churches have believed throughout the last 2,000 years.

Let me just read part of the Apostles' Creed that we said a moment ago. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead. And notice in our verses how the Lord Jesus is keen to identify three elements of his return, each one of which helps us to be ready.

And I put them on the outline. Firstly, his return is imminent. It could be at any time. Verse 35, stay dressed for action.

[8 : 49] You're not going to have time to get changed. Keep your lamps burning. In the days before electricity, there won't be time to trim the wicks and light the lamps.

It's just what Jesus says later on in Luke's Gospel. I put the reference there on the outline so you can look it up later. Don't look it up now, but Luke chapter 17. There he tells us he's going to return on a completely normal day.

Everyone is going to be going about their business at school, meeting up with people, weddings, eating, drinking, social occasions.

There'll be no warnings. His return is imminent. It could happen at any time. Now, I'm conscious that in some Christian circles, COVID has prompted no end of speculation about the significance of this pandemic.

And in particular, people are asking, is it a sign that Jesus Christ is about to return? Now, quite apart from the fact that Jesus counseled against that kind of speculation, the fact is we're much

more likely to be ready if instead of speculating whether now could be the time, we simply expected his return at any time, whether we're in COVID or not, because his return is imminent.

[10:17] But second, notice how he says there will be a delay. Verse 38. If he comes in the second watch or in the third and finds them awake, blessed are those servants.

Now, the second watch of the night was between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. And then the third watch between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. Now, to which, of course, we might well say, well, hang on a moment. We've been waiting 2,000 years. That is a very long delay indeed. Well, it is to us. And yet it's not to God.

If you do have the outline, I'll put 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 8 and 9 on it. As the Apostle Peter says, But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

[11:33] God is outside time. He sees the whole of history. How long has Jesus been delayed for so far?

Well, yes, 2,000 years. Just a couple of days. And notice the reason for delay is not slowness. Rather, it is patience. He longs that people would come to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, while they can, before it is too late.

So Jesus' return is imminent. There's going to be delay. And thirdly, it will be a surprise. Verse 39. But know this, that if the master of a house had known of what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. Now, I have twice been burgled.

[12:36] On both occasions, it was unexpected. It wasn't ready. If only I'd received a tip-off. I'd have stayed in. I wouldn't have gone out.

I'd have stayed in with a cricket bat or a hockey stick in hand or something like that. Jesus concludes, verse 40, You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

The you there is emphatic. It is insistent. Here is the Lord Jesus addressing his disciples. He has been doing that since chapter 12, verse 22.

Regardless of what others are doing, make sure you are ready, he is saying. Now, I guess one of the phrases that we've heard a lot over the last few months is the idea of being on the wrong side of history.

The idea that future generations might look back on something we do now and judge us to be in the wrong for it. Take, for example, and most obviously, the slave trade.

[13:48] It was respectable in America and in England for much of the 18th century. And yet now, of course, we realise how very wrong indeed it was.

Those who participated in it were on the wrong side of history. Or more recently, the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, warned ahead of Donald Trump's visits to the UK last year that welcoming him would put us on the wrong side of history.

The point being, of course, that we all have blind spots, things that we fail to see. And yet the concept of being on the wrong side of history also has a massive problem.

Because, of course, it relies on and assumes that we know how history is going to end up. And that, of course, is why these words of Jesus Christ are so very important, because he shows us where history is heading.

His return at the end of time to usher in the new heavens and the new earth. That is the one event you really don't want to be on the wrong side of.

[15:02] Jesus warning us against having the biggest blind spot of all, not being ready for his return. Because the risk of being unprepared, the risk of falling asleep, is very real indeed.

In fact, earlier on in Luke chapter 12, he has shown us what some of those things are. You may remember from earlier on in the summer, when we looked at those verses. So in chapter 12, verses 1 to 12, the danger that comes from opposition and persecution.

It summarised for us in verses 8 and 9, the temptation to be a secret disciple. As Jesus says, I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before men, will be denied before the angels of God. Perhaps a particular danger if we're starting a new job or a new school, or going up to university for the first

time.

We may be a wealth and ambition that will mean we're asleep when Jesus returns. In which case, we need to heed the warning of the parable of the rich fool in Luke chapter 12, verses 13 to 21.

[16:27] Do you remember the successful businessman? And what does he say to himself? Verses 18 and 19, he says, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones.

And there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.

And yet the tragedy is that he is spectacularly short-sighted. Verse 20, But God said to him, Fool, this very night your soul is required of you.

And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? He's completely unprepared for the day when Jesus returns and he has to meet him.

Well, it may simply be the anxieties of life, the stuff of daily life that demands our attention, that means we're not ready.

[17:27] Luke 12, verses 22 to 23. And Jesus said to his disciples, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.

For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. So easy to be distracted. So easy to set our hearts on other things, our ambitions, our horizons on other things.

Instead, verse 31, we're to set our horizons and ambitions on Jesus' kingdom. Remember the lie that Jesus exposes here?

It's there in verse 34. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Did you spot the lie? It's that if we seek after treasure in this world, it won't shape our hearts. But it will. Don't imagine you are the exception.

[18:34] Be ready. Secondly, it will be worth it. It will be worth the wait.

Verse 37. Blessed are those servants who the master finds awake when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.

I wonder whether one of the reasons those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ may not be ready is because we're not really persuaded in our heart of hearts that what Jesus offers is actually better.

Over the holiday, I read the New York Times bestseller *When Breath Becomes Air*, written by a guy called Paul Kalanithi, a top American neurosurgeon.

He'd been brought up in a Christian home. He'd been ambitious to make it to the top in his field. He was spectacularly successful. He made it completely to the top of the career ladder.

[19:49] And then he had a second career, waiting in the wings as an author, which was all mapped out as well. Life was good. He had married the girl he fell for when he was at college, and they lived in a fantastic house.

Until, that is, he was diagnosed with cancer, and he died at the age of 37. Thank God's great kindness, he'd started to go to church again, although it's hard to tell from the book what he made of Jesus.

And yet the point is this, that the life he lived, his life was almost too good. I guess it's a danger for many of us, isn't it, when our horizons and ambitions are focused on this world.

It's why I began this morning by asking the question, what might some of those things be for us at the moment that we are focused on? But notice, here's the thing, Jesus isn't saying, forget about all those things, they are unimportant by comparison.

Now, of course, that would be true, but it's not really going to change our hearts. Instead, he says, get the biggest thing in perspective, that I'm coming again.

[21:10] grasp how wonderful that will be. And once you've got that thing in perspective, then actually all the other things will get in perspective as well.

Have a look at verse 37 again. It's hard to think, isn't it, of anything more wonderful. It's so the wrong way round.

It would have been inconceivable in the first century that any master of the house would stoop to such lowly service. Yet this is precisely what Jesus does.

It's like the Queen hosting a garden party and making the sandwiches and pouring the tea herself. Or back to *Downton Abbey*, imagine Carson, the head butler, opening the door, out steps Lord Grantham from the car.

Thanks for staying up for us, Carson, now you go and put your feet up in front of the fire and we'll make you a meal. And yet, verse 37 should not surprise us either.

[22 : 17] After all, the first time Jesus came to earth, he had explained that he came not to be served by others, but instead to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.

He died on the cross to take the penalty for our sins, to bring forgiveness, to bring peace with God for those who trust in him. And in just the same way, when he returns the second time, he will again serve his people.

He will take us to the heavenly banquet. I wonder what you imagine the return of Jesus to be like as he returns in splendour and glory at the end of time.

And I wonder where you picture yourself in all of that. Perhaps at the back of the crowds, perhaps in the cheap seats where there's a restricted view, you're having to kind of peer around the corner to see what's really happening.

an insignificant spectator. Well, instead, if we belong to Jesus, we'll be seated at the heavenly banquet being waited on by the King of Kings.

[23 : 33] It is the most extraordinary imagery. Now, I think Jesus here is picking up on the Old Testament picture or one of the Old Testament pictures of the new creation.

Turn to Isaiah 25 if you have a Bible in front of you. It's probably not much help me telling you what page it's on, but if you've got one of these church Bibles then it's on page 708.

Isaiah chapter 25. And let me read verses 6 to 8 for us, which is one of a number of descriptions of what the new creation will be like.

Isaiah 25 verses 6 to 8. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make all peoples, will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, aged wine well-refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever.

[24 : 48] And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Can you see what Isaiah is saying? Death swallowed up forever, no more suffering, no more tears, a glorious heavenly banquet.

And have a look at verse 9, because verse 9 shows us what all those people who are present will be saying. Behold, this is our God.

We have waited for him that he might save us. This is the Lord. We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

living the Christian life over the long haul is not easy. And frankly, many of the things which might divert us away from Jesus, of course, they look very attractive in themselves.

[25 : 56] And yet, Jesus is showing us it is worth the wait. Well, let me finish by applying our passage this morning to three groups of people.

First of all, I guess there may well be those and actually, in all honesty, you feel you are not ready or may not be ready for the return of Jesus.

Well, I'd love to be able to chat to you further, or why not just talk to a Christian friend about how you might be ready? Because I hope we can see from Jesus' teaching here this morning that it is an absolute disaster, not to be ready.

Secondly, those who may once have been awake, but are now sleepy. Wake up! Perhaps we're tempted to think that Jesus may not return yet, perhaps even to reason, well, yes, I know I'm spiritually sleepy, but this is just for a season, a particularly busy period of life that I'm in, I'll get things sorted when, dot, dot, dot.

For some of us, our wealth, our success, means we are all but asleep. We need to be delivered from having our horizon fixed on what is simply passing, and fleeting, and temporal.

[27 : 24] we need to understand that if we're not ready for Jesus to return today, then we mustn't kid ourselves that we'll be ready tomorrow.

Third, for those who are ready, because waiting is hard, isn't it? I find it hard, being a pastor doesn't make it any easier, but these verses are such a glorious encouragement, aren't they?

As Jesus says, it will be worth it as he serves his people in the new creation. Let's have a few moments for reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer.

blessed are those servants who the master finds awake when he comes.

Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service, and have them recline at table. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this glorious reminder that the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ offers far more than this world can ever offer.

[28 : 46] Thank you that he will return at the end of history as he has said he would. We pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us, that each one of us would indeed be those who are awake.

Please help us to both heed the warnings of this passage, and also to hold on to the wonderful encouragements. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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