

The Return Of The King

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[0 : 00] Lord Jesus, we pray that as we come to your word now that you would speak to us by the power of your spirit, that you would grow us in Christ, that you would make us alive in you, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Great opportunity for me to promote the resource stand. There's one of these left called Radical Together, and we had a couple of copies on it, on the stand, and it was the subtitle of the book that caught my attention out at Curon because it says, Unleashing the People of God for the Purpose of God.

Which is what we've clearly signalled is what we want to do within our church family in the coming 12 months. Activate people for ministry more so than even what we've got at the moment.

So unleashing the people of God for the purpose of God. And I got into this book and read some of it through the week, and it was just a joy to me. And I decided to throw away the beginning of my message this morning and read to you from something I read.

I was sitting in a small room on the most un-evangelised island on earth. And as I looked out the window, I saw the sun rising over shanties that spread across the landscape for miles.

[1 : 13] The mist began to disappear over the millions of men and women who inhabited this massive city in the middle of the island. Beyond the city limits, multitudes of other people were spread throughout rural villages, many of which require days of travel to reach.

And as I watched the city begin to awaken, I heard the early morning call to prayer. Religious incantations resounded from loudspeakers stationed throughout the city, so that everyone could hear them.

And everywhere people began their day by solemnly going to prayer rooms and sacred sites to bow and worship. Most of the 45 million people on the island are Muslim, and most of them have never heard the gospel.

Nearly 50 different people groups on the island have no church to speak of in their midst, and many of the people have never known a person who has confessed faith in Christ. What is interesting, though, and unfortunately ironic, is that the most unevangelised island on earth is also home to millions of Christians.

One of the largest tribes on the island is filled with professing believers. Years ago, a Baptist couple came to this island to share the gospel with the tribal leaders.

[2 : 35] Those leaders did not like what they heard, and so they killed and cannibalised the two missionaries. Yet a Lutheran from Germany came to the same tribe, and this time when he proclaimed the gospel, the tribal leaders listened and believed, and within months the majority of the tribe had professed faith in Christ.

The problem, however, is that in the years since this mass conversion to Christianity, this tribe has turned inward, and due to a variety of factors, including cultural isolation and religious persecution, these Christians have virtually kept Christ to themselves.

Take the issue of pork. Muslim tribes across this island do not eat pork because they believe it is unclean. This Christian tribe, on the other hand, loves to eat pork, and naturally any Christian wanting to reach Muslims with the gospel would be wise to abstain from pork around Muslims.

Yet most Christians here are not willing to even take this small step. One believer succinctly said to a friend of mine on the island, I would rather a Muslim go to hell than for me to have to stop eating pork.

Reaching Muslims here would not only be uncomfortable for Christians, it would also be costly. Many Muslim tribes on the island are devout, and one state practices Sharia law.

[4 : 01] Anyone caught trying to lead people to Christ in that state will be imprisoned or likely even killed. Any Muslim caught converting to faith in Christ in that state will immediately be executed.

Indeed, the price is high for any believer here who desires to engage the unreached with the gospel. And so Christians sit back. They're living next to multitudes of unreached peoples, yet they are unwilling to share Christ with them.

Indeed, they focus on church activities among themselves. They have constructed large church buildings all over the city. They have numerous denominational conventions, nearly 30 theological seminaries, and even missions boards organised among themselves throughout the island.

My friend who lives here says, David, they have all the trappings of the church, and the only thing they are missing is the heart of Christ. And as soon as my friend said this, I was stunned into silence.

I thought, is it really possible to have all the trappings of the church and miss the heart of Christ? Is it possible for church people to be so focused on personal comforts and so fearful of potential cost, they virtually forget the purpose of God among all the peoples of the world?

[5 : 24] And as I asked the question, I realised the answer, is of course it's possible. Much of what we have seen in the West proves that we have massive resources, mega buildings, multitudes of programs, and a myriad of conferences and activities.

Meanwhile, thousands of people, groups around us in the world, still have not heard the gospel. And from most appearances in the church, however, we seem to be okay with that.

We seem content to let these people, groups continue churchless, Christless, gospel-less. To seriously engage them with the gospel would be uncomfortable and costly.

And on it goes. Now I'm continuing our series of messages from Matthew chapter 24 and 25 on the second coming of Jesus Christ.

And we've been learning that Jesus taught that the end of the world and his first coming are two separate events. That was something that was new for the mindset of the people amongst who he lived.

[6 : 39] There will be a period of time before he returns. Jesus will return. He will return suddenly and unexpectedly. People will be going about normal life.

The world as we know it will end with the return of Jesus Christ as Lord and King. And for some, his return will be a wonderful surprise and for others, a very unpleasant one.

No one will escape the event. Everyone who has ever lived will be raised to life to face the judgment of God. And understanding these things has really important consequences.

We have power to call false teaching rubbish when people make predictions about Christ's return. Jesus says, no one knows the hour or the day, only his dad.

There's been a great story in the media even this week. The American pastor called Howard Camping died at 92. And he was famous or he was infamous because he predicted the coming of Christ several times in his life.

[7 : 47] He finished well. He apologised for a very grave mistake. But what was incredibly sad to me, the news this week showed some of the stories at the time when he did these things and he had people in his church family, his followers, who literally gave their life savings to advertising the date on which Christ was going to return and telling people to get ready for it.

And they showed the other protesters gathered out his side, his church, on the day, one of the days when it was supposed to have occurred and there were people there with placards and banners and saying things like, trust science, don't trust religion.

So when we move beyond what God's word allows, we can cause the name of Christ to be dragged through the mud. In Matthew 25, Jesus uses two pictures to describe what he has already taught in Matthew 24.

And the pictures show us how to live between the two comings of Jesus. Last week, the first picture was the parable of the ten virgins, five who were wise, they were well prepared for the delayed return of the bridegroom, and five who were foolish, who thought they knew the bridegroom, but didn't.

And this morning, the second picture in Matthew 25, the parable of the talents, the Bible reading that Josh has just read to us. And again, this is a story about how to live in the light of Jesus' delayed return.

[9 : 29] And you pick that up from verse 14 because Jesus said, again, it will be like a man going on a journey. He's about to go on a journey. And in verse 19, after a long time, the master of those servants returns.

So it's going to be a long period of time between his departure and between his return. This is about life between the two comings of Jesus. It's a great story.

The master's going on a journey. He calls his servants in. He entrusts them with the running of his business. He gives them a task, something to do. One of them gets five talents to look after. One gets two. The other gets one. He gives each of them responsibility. And verse 15 says, each according to his own ability.

He gives them what he believes they're capable of handling. There's nothing more, nothing less, not too much and not too little. But this is big business.

[10 : 30] I worked it out the other day. Our talent was a measure of money. It's not a God-given gift or ability. It's a measure of money. And a talent was equal to 6,000 days wages, 6,000 denarii.

And the average Australian wage at present is something like \$70,000. You divide that by 52. And again, for five, by five, for a five-day working work, it comes out at something like \$270 a day.

So if you're getting less than that, you're not getting the average wage. And if you're getting more, you're getting far more than you should be getting. Not true. But you work it out. A talent in today's values is nearly \$1.5 million.

So five talents is \$7.5 million. And two is \$3 million. So these guys are actually entrusted with running their master's business.

They're given really big sums of money to be responsible for. And they're running the business until the master returns. You see, the first two, they get to work, they double the money over a long time.

[11 : 42] These are not short-term money market gains. This is solid, hard work building a business. And the third, verse 18, went off dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

Now that wasn't such a strange thing to do. A rabbi at the time said that the best way to protect money was to bury it.

In a world without banks and without chub safes and all sorts of security, a normal way to protect your money was to bury it and not tell people where you'd planted it. So much for your family if you died suddenly.

HSC Ancient History teaches that soldiers going off to war would bury their personal fortunes in the ground to keep it safe until they return. These three guys are entrusted with the master's business. They're given responsibility and the master has expectations of them according to their ability. They are to be on about the master's business while he's absent.

[12 : 58] They are to work industriously for him. So a day of reckoning comes. The day of settling accounts comes a long time later.

a delayed return. And the first has turned seven million dollars into fourteen million dollars.

And the second has turned three million dollars into six million dollars. And the master says exactly the same to both of them. Excellent.

Good and faithful servants. You have been faithful in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. He's delighted.

He recognizes their hard work. They rejoice in their success together. It's not their money but they have been successful for their master and he is pleased for them and he is pleased with them.

[14 : 03] They are well prepared for their master's return because they have been faithfully discharging their responsibilities. They share joy all around when he comes back because they have been on about the master's business.

Very different story from the third man or with the third man. Verse 24. Oh master I knew you were a hard man. Harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed and so I was afraid and I went out and I hid your talent in the ground and say here it is.

Here is what belongs to you. I've kept it all safe. I haven't lost a cent. But as he says these words he almost accuses his master of being a venture capitalist making his money on other people's efforts. You just trade on everybody else. Saw it in the bush. Saw it in Wee-Woo. Farmers had planted their crops and they would pay big money to grow them.

And they would live with the risk of the season. And then they sold their crops into markets where the price was controlled by commodity and money traders in cities around the world like New York.

[15 : 16] Men and women in business suits who wouldn't have a clue what dirt was let alone putting their hands into it. That's not your job is it? In Sydney. They're probably those people in churches higher up the north shore.

Is that correct? Or lower down. There you go. But this third servant seems to have little respect for his master. He goes, he gets the money, tosses it back to him.

I've looked after it for you. I was afraid of you and so I made sure I kept every last cent safe.

mongrel boss that you are. He didn't say that.

The master's filthy. You wicked, lazy servant. So you knew I harvest where I haven't sown and gather where I haven't scattered seed.

Well then you should have put your money on deposit with the bankers so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Jews couldn't charge fellow Jews.

[16 : 21] interest. But money could be borrowed in the Roman Empire to a maximum of 12%. Could have at least put it in the bank and this last man is a piece of work.

He has a shot at his master to pass off blame. He's drawing a wage from the business but he doesn't care two bits about his master's business. He's dumped a vast sum of money in a hole in the ground for the entire time that his master was away and presumably got on with life and his own business.

He did his own thing. His master said he was wicked and he was lazy. How long would you last in your job if you went to work and you used all the company's stationery and computer peripherals? If you spent all day on the phone on personal business, wouldn't your employer have every right to throw you out of the place? See the third servant in this parable might have been working his butt off while his master was absent but growing his own share portfolio, doing a stack of beneficial trades on eBay, running around and doing work for mates all over the place, he may have been busier even than the other two.

But Jesus called him wicked and lazy because he was squandering his master's resources and business. He wasn't responding at all to the one who had the right to tell him what his work was, he did his own thing.

[17 : 52] Is that not a picture of the church that I read about at the beginning? Full of religious activity and a beautiful infrastructure and not touching their Muslim neighbours?

I reckon if you'd asked this guy what his job was, he probably would have said, I work for the master. And if you looked at what he was doing all the time, the master away was away.

It was nothing. It was a big fat zilch. And Jesus called the man wicked and lazy, his doom assured, cast away into darkness, never to be heard from again.

Now I hope it's not too hard to see where this is heading. Jesus, our King, has come once and he will come again. We live awaiting his return.

He's been a long time. He could come back today. He could come back a long time into the future.

[19 : 04] But he will return. But in the meantime, we are stewards of the master's business. We are not here for ourselves. We are here for what God wants us to do.

In Matthew 24, Jesus tells us that the faithful and wise servant is the one whom the master has put in charge of his household. And when the master returns, he finds his servant faithfully at work doing his job.

Matthew 24 also gives a huge glimpse of what the master's business is. Verse 14, this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come.

And in verse 31, he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other. Angel sounds all spooky as in heavenly messengers and sometimes they are.

But angel simply means messenger. And so it's completely valid to read this last verse as he will send his messengers with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other.

[20 : 28] When I went to South Africa recently and worked with Andrew Barnes who was the pastor at Musenberg Community Church and the pastor of the church that Darian and Vanessa are at, he wrote to Darian, our link missionary afterwards and he said about me, let's blow my own trumpet for a sec, he said, it's as though God sent an angel to say exactly the right things to me, I feel so encouraged to carry on.

Enormous encouragement to me and I am thrilled to think that God used me as his messenger in his time to encourage Andrew and let me tell you that Andrew was an enormous blessing to me as well.

But the point for me with angels is that God uses heavenly beings as his messengers and he also uses human beings, he uses human beings as his messengers.

So what's happening between the first and second comings of Jesus? His gospel is being preached to the nations. God's messengers are being sent out into all the world to gather his chosen people in.

It's a joyous and it's a magnificent work and Romans chapter 10 expresses it, it says everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How can they call on the one they have not believed in and how can they believe on the one of whom they have not heard?

[21 : 58] And how can they hear without someone preaching to them and how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. See people are gathered to God through the preaching of the gospel.

As the message of Christ is spoken in God's world, people are gathered from the four corners of the earth into his family. Preaching of the gospel, declaration about Christ happens in formal settings like church but where Christian people come to gather or maybe somebody interested in finding out. It also happens in informal places like over morning tea at work and in time reading the scriptures with our children, at dinner with friends. Being on about the master's business in the context here is particularly about telling the world about Jesus Christ in both word and in deed.

I remember feeling really embarrassed at one of my ordination interviews a long time ago and I was asked, have you led anybody to Christ?

It's almost like how many notches have you got on your belt? And at the time I couldn't think of anyone. But if the question had been who had I spoken to about Christ, then the list would have been long.

[23 : 29] It would have been family, it would have been friends, it would have been workmates, it would have been the occasional stranger, mostly people that I had some sort of a relationship with.

See, we don't control the response, but we do have control over whether we open our mouths and speak, we have control over what we say and we have control over how we say it.

My engineering boss would give me some stick. He was a bit of a rogue and he would wind me up at work about my faith. He knew I was a Christian and we'd had numbers of conversations.

And his girls were Christian. And I didn't convert him. But I did speak to him about Christ numbers of times. And 30 years later, I got his Christmas card the other day and it's been developing over quite a few years, but it's a joy to read his Christmas cards because he now strongly proclaims Christ as he cares for an invalid wife who suffers with MS.

He has been growing as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has gathered another one of his elect from the four corners of the earth through the saving message about Jesus Christ. So brothers and sisters, own your faith and speak about it.

[24 : 57] Understand that when people give you a hard time, some of them will be people that God is gathering into his kingdom even in the future. And how you respond to them even now, as pain in the butt as they might be, matters.

See, Christmas time itself brings many opportunities to own Christ. Tell people that you're going to church. Tell people that Christmas is much bigger than a baby story.

It's about what this amazing man came to do. Take the opportunities that God gives you to speak about what you believe. Be on about the master's business.

It's a wonderful parable because God recognises our different opportunities. Two servants grow their master's business. He's equally pleased with both of them.

He makes no distinction between them in terms of his pleasure with them. They have both been doing his business and he loves them for it. And he speaks the same wonderful word to both of them.

[26 : 01] He says, well done, good and faithful servants. Come and share your master's happiness. Amen.