

# CERTAINTIES OF THE SECOND COMING

*(1 Thessalonians 5.1-11 and Matthew 24.36-44)*

Mary and John lived in Eaglescliffe. They had some very good friends, Joe and Olive, who had emigrated to New Zealand some years ago. They kept in touch and sent each other Christmas cards every year. To Mary and John's delight, out of the blue there was a 'phone call from New Zealand one October day in 2015. *Hi! We're going to be over in the UK next June and we are going to be driving down the A1 on the way to York on the 16th. Is it OK if we call to look you up? We should be there about 11 o'clock. Great, said Mary and John, we'll look forward to that.* So the date went in at the back of their 2015 diary.

But on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016. Mary and John were decorating the hall and staircase – both in paint-spattered overalls. In the hall was a wallpaper table; at the bottom of the stairs was an old workbench with open paint tins and brushes on it. Mary was at the top of a stepladder stripping wallpaper near the front door. John was in the middle of mixing some paint. The front door bell rang. By the time they had cleared a way to the front door they were just able to recognise Joe and Olive driving away. They never heard from them again. Mary and John had forgotten to transfer the date into their new 2016 diary.

For the people who lived and were on holiday in Amatrice in central Italy in August this year it was much, much worse. There they were at 3.30 in the morning, asleep in their homes or hotels when the earthquake struck. Some survived - but 241 died.

We will come back to those in due course.

Jesus was brilliant at painting word pictures but our passage from Matthew must be one of the most dramatic of them all. First he harks back to story of the ark, the scripture which his hearers would know so well.

Everybody enjoying themselves, doing what people do in their lives, then incessant, intense, all powerful, all conquering rain and rain and rain and they are no more.

Then he comes right up to the here and now:

Two farmhands turning hay – suddenly there's only one!

Two women about their normal domestic work – suddenly there's only one!

And St. Paul is no slouch at the dramatic. In the part of the letter that comes just before our reading we get this:

*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God. And a bit later – and we will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air – dramatic picture language.*

A few weeks ago some of us here went to the Sage at Gateshead to hear a performance of Verdi's Requiem. It starts with a short prayer asking for eternal rest for the dead. Then after 'Lord have mercy' we get these dramatic words:

*The day of wrath; that day will dissolve the world in ashes... how great will be the terror when the judge comes... the trumpet, scattering a marvellous sound through the tombs of every land, will gather all before the throne.*

Every Requiem written has something similar in it.

It's there too in both the Nicene and the Apostle's creed which we often use. *He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.*

So why all this dramatic stuff from Jesus, from the early letters and from composers addressing death and creedal statements? Why? Because this is important stuff!

Some themes are given particular importance in the Bible. New birth is mentioned 9 times. Baptism is mentioned 22 times. Repentance is mentioned 70 times. We often hear about them. What about the second coming of Jesus? It is in the New Testament no fewer than 319 times. For every occasion that Jesus' first coming is mentioned, the second coming is mentioned 8 times.

Almost all of us have heard Handel's great oratorio – *Messiah*. Can you remember the part that starts: *And the glory, the glory of the Lord*. In that part Handel sets to music these wonderful words from chapter 40 of Isaiah: *And the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it*. There are three things to note about those few words:

Absolute certainty. *The glory of the Lord shall be revealed*. Shall be revealed. No doubt there; it will happen!

It will affect everyone – *all flesh shall see it together*. Everyone who has lived will experience this glorious revelation!

It has been unequivocally promised by God – *for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.*

Words of prophesy, re-iterated forcibly by Jesus and emphasised by the New Testament letter writers and in particular Paul in our Thessalonians reading: *While people are saying 'peace and safety' destruction will come upon them suddenly*

An unemployed actor finally got a one-line part in a big West End play. He only had five words to say; *Hark! How the cannons roar!* And he spent all his time practicing different ways of saying it.

On the morning of the first day he ate his breakfast muttering *Hark! How the cannons roar!* As he caught the tube into the city he repeated to himself *Hark! How the cannons roar!* Finally, as he stood in the wings waiting for his moment to come, he said over and over;

*Hark! How the cannons roar! Hark! How the cannons roar!*

At last the moment came. He walked on stage and his cue came: BANG. *What was that?* he cried!

At least our pathetic actor knew when his line was supposed to be spoken even if he did make a mess of it. But we do not know when the second coming will be and it's no good trying to second-guess God because he is...well, because he is God. Isaiah in chapter 55 reminds us:

*'For my thoughts are not your thoughts nor my ways your ways' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'*

A young man once asked God how long a million years was to him. God replied: *A million years to me is just like a single second to you.* The young man asked God what a million pounds was to him. God replied: *A million pounds to me is just like a single penny to you.*

Then the young man got his courage up and asked; *God, could I have one of your pennies?*

God smiled and replied, *Certainly, just a second.*

As we heard last week, St. Peter in his second letter uses dramatic irony to emphasise the unexpected element of the second coming:

*In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their evil desires, 'Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. In other words: Don't worry, it may never happen*

Can we compare Alan Sugar to Satan – of course not. It would be defamatory. But imagine Satan sitting behind that table grilling three apprentices. *What will you do to tempt and ruin men?*

One said: *I will tell them there is no God. Useless* said Satan, *that will not delude many – they know there is a God.*

The next apprentice came up with: *I will tell men there is no hell. That's no good*, said Satan, *most people know that hell exists in some form or other.*

It was the turn of the third apprentice: *I will tell men there is no hurry. Off you go*, said Satan, beaming all over his face, *and you will ruin them by the thousand.*

So, (as they say in posh reports) an executive summary:

The second coming is of vital importance.

- It will happen and it will happen out of the blue – with no warning
- It will be cataclysmic
- Some people will be taken to be with God in eternity – some will not!
- For those chosen, it will be so wonderful – *the glory of the Lord will be revealed!*

Remember Mary and John and their visitors from New Zealand and the unfortunate victims of the earthquake at Amatrice in Italy. Their experiences are, of course, different in many ways but one difference is particularly striking in the context of this talk. The people in Amatrice had no advance warning of what was about to happen. Mary and John had been told that their friends were coming but they were not ready for them when they came.

For ourselves readiness is the watchword not forgetfulness or indifference or postponement. As the evangelist Tony Campolo once said: *I've no idea when Jesus is coming back. I'm on the Welcoming Committee, not the Planning Committee.*

What about those who are not ready, perhaps relatives and friends who have not yet accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour? Remember Jesus words, *One will be taken and the other left*. But Jesus said something else - right at the end of St. Matthew's gospel. He gave these orders: *Go and make disciples*.

You may have heard of a north-east-wide project called *Talking Jesus*. If you haven't, Gary Thompson (one of our 10.30 people) will make sure you know about it. It will happen next March when a group of Christians - bishops, curates, priests, theological students will be here for at least one event designed to appeal to people we know who are not yet Christians so that they can hear about Jesus and all he is and did. There will be an opportunity for each of us to invite a friend or family member to that. Please, take it.

I came across this poem written a long time ago by a simple black American – probably a slave. I think it's worth sharing.

There's a king and a captain high, and he's coming by and by,  
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.  
You can hear his legions charging in the regions of the sky,  
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.  
There's a man they thrust aside who was tortured till he died,  
And they'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.  
He was hated and rejected, he was scorned and crucified,  
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.  
When he comes! When he comes!  
He'll be crowned by saints and angels when he comes.  
They'll be shouting out Hosanna! To the man that men denied  
And I'll kneel among my cotton when he comes.

You and I – let's make sure we are on that welcoming committee – when he comes!