

11 August 2019

WAKEY WAKEY, THE LORD WANTS OUR ATTENTION

Sermon by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered in St Paul's Cathedral Church,
Dunedin.

LECTIONARY READINGS:

Genesis 15: 1-6

Psalms 33: 12-22

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Luke 12: 32-40

INTRODUCTION

As a preacher one has mixed emotions approaching the lectionary readings for the upcoming sermon. There is always a **great thrill** in the privilege of studying the scriptures, praying for spiritual insight, and discerning the message which the Lord wants delivered. But one also has a **certain dread** because most passages in the Bible have an element of challenge, some can be

very daunting, while others are just plain terrifying.

Of course, a **streetwise preacher** knows how to bob and weave through the lectionary so as to cherry pick the comfortable and easy verses while avoiding the others.

But sometimes you get a set of readings where it doesn't matter how homiletically nimble you are, you know that as a preacher you have been **stood to attention**, and you haven't got an easy task ahead of you.

Well, today's Gospel reading made me sit up and think long and hard about how it relates to us in Dunedin.

A couple of provisional thoughts spring to mind:

A. Have you heard the term "**honest conversation**"

– because I think God wants to have an honest

conversation with us this morning. There are two types of honest conversations. In the army we used to call one such conversation as an “interview without coffee”. The other was a conversation when you were informed that your name was on the “Queen’s honours list” which is promulgated twice yearly. Well the Lord, I believe, wants to have an honest conversation with us this morning.

B. The other thought which springs to mind is that we need to be **alert** because the Lord is serious, and we need to get with his message, and to stay focused.

Many of you know that my daytime job is with civil defence emergency management and I have just finished my week on the duty phone. I have several **alert apps** on my smart phone

which beep, vibrate, and sometimes shout at me [for example Geonet app for earthquakes, Red Cross Hazard app for all hazards in New Zealand, Metservice app for bad weather, Pacific Disaster Centre Disaster Alert app for everything bad that happens anywhere in the world except alerting us to dodgy politicians and dubious business deals, and the NZ government Emergency Mobile Alert which overrides everything on your smart phone and squawks at you. And of course, I also have email, text, WhatsApp, and the telephone where a human can actually speak to me. So, I need to be alert in my job because lives depend on a decisive and timely response to an emergency and, very often, the alerts are

raising an awareness of a developing situation, which requires our immediate attention.

OK, so I believe God wants to send an alert to us concerning a developing situation and God wants to have an honest conversation with us this morning.

So open your pew sheet and have another look at the Gospel passage and what do you make of it?

1. FIRSTLY, DO NOT BE AFRAID

And I love this opening passage – **“Do not be afraid little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom”**. There is so much to fear: terrorism; war; the economy; global warming; unemployment, hunger, poverty, homelessness; disease and death. It is impossible

to escape: walk the city streets, drive on Otago's snow and icy winter roads, see the signs all around. If you prefer, stay at home, where the TV news delights in keeping us apprised of bad news including that New Zealand may not win the Rugby World Cup, texts crawl at the bottom of television screens, information updates flash in Web browsers, and spam e-mails try and swindle us out of our money, and mysterious telephone calls say we have problems with our computer which they want to solve for us by downloading a free piece of their software. If we were not afraid before, we are certainly encouraged by the media and our culture to be afraid now.

Into that fear, across centuries of human experience, Jesus' teaching offers an extraordinary word of comfort in an increasingly

threatening world: **“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (v. 32).**

Now this is not whistling-in-the-dark comfort, but rather the reassurance that what is seen is not all that is, a reminder that the fears pressing upon us need not have the last word in defining our life.

God is “your Father”; and God’s “good pleasure” is to give you the kingdom, a treasure in heaven that is imperishable. These reminders of God’s sovereignty and gracious protection, along with the promise of the Son’s return, serve as antidotes to our fears.

Given the number of reminders not to worry or be afraid that appear in Luke chapter 12, the first hearers of this gospel message must have had reason to fear many things.

What about us, about you? Are you afraid of being killed, Jesus asks? Remember that God is concerned even with the hairs of your head (12:4–7).

Are you worried about having the right words when you must make a defense of the gospel? Have confidence that the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say (12:8–12).

Does fear of an uncertain future cause you to disregard the needs of others and to stash your possessions in a spirit of greediness? Recall that you cannot take it with you at the end of your life (12:13–21).

Are you worried about your life, about food or clothing—or, one might add, about organic produce, designer shirts, stylish cars, a fat bank

account, or any of the other outward signs that one has “made it” in the eyes of the world?

At even a more basic level, are you afraid of starvation and homelessness?

Do not let your concern for these things turn you away from what is most important: striving for the kingdom (or reign) of God (12:22–31).

Look I understand why we get anxious about life and death – I certainly felt anxious as a soldier serving 5 years on military operations - (human finitude) or anxious about food and clothing – Katherine needs a clothing budget and I am trying to wangle buying a cope to complete my Anglican vestments (earthly possessions).

But these are **human means of protection and well-being**, and they compare little with God’s means.

Worrying about them will not make a difference, in one's life or in one's death.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Now this is not a God who, after creating the universe, sits back and dispassionately watches it all unfold. But this is the Lord who attends to sparrows, ravens, and lilies, a God whose concern for humankind extends to the very hairs on our heads, a God whose desire is to give the treasure of heaven.

Let me say that again – in the name of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit – he desires to give you the treasure of heaven. So, look through your fears to the glory and kindness of God, whom we call Father.

And some of us may not have had great fathers or indeed great parenting; but today, from eternity and from the realms of unimaginable glory, a voice speaks into your life **“Be not afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”**

2. SECONDLY, BE READY FOR A BLESSING

Then Luke chapter 12 recalls a curious **parable** Jesus tells of the master who returns to his household late at night. A parable to **illustrate the importance of being ready and waiting for a dramatic intervention of God in our lives**, - and this is the honest conversation that I believe God wants to have with us this morning.

Jesus pictures God donning an apron and serving a midnight banquet to those found alert and expectant. Can you possibly imagine this

extravagant and surreal scene perhaps depicted in a stained-glass window? What would it look like to discover God in our very midst, serving an impromptu meal in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral?

The honest conversation of this week's Gospel text focuses our attention not on the demands of the overly scheduled life but on God, who comes in surprising ways to offer comfort, assurance, and lasting treasure to **you. Are you ready? Are you up for it? Are you exhausted waiting and longing for the Lord to answer your prayers?**

“It will be good, says Luke 12:38, for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak.”

This is not a conversation without coffee but a conversation saying that you have been given a **royal appointment – and that is a certainty, but it is uncertain when his majesty, the King of Kings, will visit you.**

But it will be good, Jesus says, for those servants whose master finds them ready.

Now the **blessings offered here are known most by those who are no longer afraid** of potential danger, or darkness, and death, those who live lives - that many people across time and continents - cannot even to begin to embrace or to comprehend.

You see human nature encourages us to live in fear, to believe that giving, instead of taking, will lead to destitution, to deprivation, and to desperation.

But the **Gospel** this morning promises that giving from what we have, will make us mindful of the God of blessing, and make us ready to receive the gifts that God offers, which is his glorious and eternal kingdom, arriving now but perfected later at the end of time !

So are you ready for such a blessing? Are you awake?

3. THIRDLY, AND FINALLY WE ARE ASKED TO HAVE A STEP CHANGE IN OUR THINKING TO BE ALERT BECAUSE CHRIST IS GOING TO RETURN

Verse 33–34 talks about **possessions** then moves to verse 39-40 talking about the **Parousia**, which is a technical theological term for the return of Christ.

The text continues to focus on ultimates.

Now the ultimate focus – and this is the step change in our thinking - involves Jesus' climactic return (i.e., his Parousia), at which time God's kingdom - including our lives within this kingdom - will become complete.

And we will have arrived at the ultimate destination of life's long and sometime weary and fearful road. We will have arrived home.

Praise the Lord!

The immediate concern in the text is **not on the delay** of Jesus' coming, but the **tension between certainty and uncertainty** in relationship to his return.

On the one hand, Jesus' ultimate return is certain; hence the exhortations to full preparedness in verse 35.

On the other hand, the exact timing of his return is uncertain; hence the negative thief-in-the-night parable in verse 39.

Be alert, says Christ. Have a step change in your thinking.

“Why do you stand in such an unbecoming position?” the Duke of Wellington once asked an officer caught slouching in uniform. “I’m off duty, sir,” the man replied. Then the Duke bellowed, “A British officer is never off duty. Resume your military bearing.” There is no such thing as being off-duty for a commissioned officer of Her Majesty Armed Forces.

The term “argus-eyed” means being extraordinarily watchful. Thus, an argus-eyed

committee may watch the counting of the money or the ballots. Argus, you see, is a monster in Greek mythology, it had one hundred eyes, and only two of which were said to sleep at once ... somewhat reminiscent of a church treasurer I suspect.

The German eagle had its head turned to the left hand, and the Roman eagle to the right hand. And when Charlemagne was made “Kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire,” he joined the two heads together, one looking east and the other west, ever watchful, always alert. Charlemagne needed to know what was going on in the empire.

**“So you use three pairs of glasses,
Professor?” “Yes, one pair for long-sight, one
pair for short-sight, and the third pair to look
for the other two pairs.” A professor needs to
be able to read!**

You see, Jesus’ final point, in this morning’s
Gospel, concludes on a very practical note:

**‘Therefore keep watch, because you do not
know on what day your Lord will come’**

Christians are to be watchful – this is the step
change in our thinking.

We are to be alert.

If the owner of the house, say Jesus, had known
at what time ... the thief was coming, he would
have waited up, and not have let his house be
burgled.

This small parable is a call for expectancy: 'To watch!' 'To be alert!'

Christians are to watch: not like astronomers through a telescope, or guards watching a CCTV screen, but like lovers who can't wait for another glimpse of their loved one.

Or like captives or prisoners in a prison camp longing for the day when they will be allowed to go home.

Jesus calls us to be expectant believers. To be open to direction, and ready for the unexpected.

Come Lord Jesus. Amen.