

Be On Guard!

a sermon preached on

Advent Sunday

2 December 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lectons: Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 23: 37-44

Keep awake - literally, *be on guard* - "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." ¹

Two attitudes will foul up Advent's great theme of being on guard: externalisation of the gospel forecast, and reduction of it to moral or ethical effort. So I choose to begin Advent by warning myself, and all of us, about these two dangerous religious dead ends. In spite of what calamitous circumstances may surround us – in politics, in church, in the environment – significance should not be attached to any of these external signs: "And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place; but the end (**τελος** *telos*) is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning (**αρχη** *archē*) of the birth pains." ²

Equally, in spite of the pervasive reduction of christian faith into a set of ethical laws and codes, the coming of the Human One is not a mere moral programme: "Then there will be two in the field; one will be taken and one will be left." ³ The text makes no suggestion that one of the workers in the field was doing the right thing and the other not – as far as the text is concerned they are both working in the field, just as the two women are both grinding. ⁴ For no apparent visible or measurable reason they are simply divided, one is taken one is left. Keeping awake, being on guard, therefore, is neither a matter of watching the news more attentively, nor being more morally righteous.

Alright then, if Advent watchfulness is neither of these, what is the purpose of being awake, and for what should we be on guard? Admittedly, these few verses we have heard this morning do not answer the question, and to that end I encourage us to read the whole of Matthew chapter 24. The opening verses of the chapter give us the clue: "As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, "You see all these things, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down." ⁵

Even after all they have heard and seen throughout their journeying with Jesus across Galilee and Judea, even so his closest friends are readily titillated by impressive externalities, by the spectacle and the grandeur of the structure, by the lure of the temporal powers which the buildings embody. They of all people should by this stage have understood that all this is passing away. But they, of course, like you and me, are so easily distracted and swept up by spectacle and driven by anxiety and unconscious fears, such that they are asleep – even in the very presence of the Son of Humanity. ⁶ And we are so prone to the wiles and the attractive promises of what Luke calls pseudo-prophets (**ψευδοπροφηται** *pseudoprophētai*) and pseudo-christs (**ψευδοχριστοι** *pseudochristoi*) ⁷ - who continue to make promises and money, spruiking temple-religion wares. And that's the nub of Advent and of the wake-up call on this first day of the Church's year. You see all these things, all this grand religion and power and success? Not one stone will be left!

¹ Matthew 24:42

² Matthew 24:6-8

³ Matthew 24:40

⁴ Matthew 24:41

⁵ Matthew 24:1-2

⁶ **υιου του ανθρωπου** *huiou tou anthrōpou* literally 'Son of humanity'

⁷ Matthew 24:24

What does this mean? It means that the old religious edifice is crumbling, its time is past, it is being replaced by an entirely new centre: the temple, in Mark's image, not made with hands, ⁸ the temple, according to St Paul, which is a human body. ⁹ I suspect that in spite of the length and breadth of the christian centuries we still struggle to grasp the enormity of what is being revealed in these profoundly symbolic texts. It is likely that our propensity to construct fine temples, such as this one, and our seemingly-terminal need for the security of religious institutions and structures as well as property and possessions, that we do not yet see, we still cling to external temples, to the old religious edifices. The reason why one in the field is taken and one is left is simply that one *has seen* the Human One's unexpected coming in the passing of the external temple, the other has not.

The old religious centre, the visible temple, is being replaced with the new and invisible centre, which remains an unfathomable mystery, a scandal even. That invisible centre is the human soul (**ψυχή** *psychē*), the place where the flesh-taking God dwells. "Do you not know," asked St Paul, "that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit *who is in you*, which you have from God? You are not your own." ¹⁰ Little wonder that one has seen and one has not! For while I am looking outside, or attempting to make myself more moral, I will never see. The goal of religious history, which must, for the sake of consistence in the cosmos, be commensurate with the whole of evolutionary history, is for us to see, to see that we are the completion of incarnation – the full flowering of the Divine impetus, the Holy Spirit, within the individual human soul. For in the human soul is the temple, and there is the sign of the Coming (**παρουσία** *parousia*) One ¹¹ - "God with us."¹²

Thus we are not our own, because our very centre is God – who is seen by one person yet remains unseen to the other, because of fear and distraction, and temptation by the grandeur of the external temple and by the lure of pseudo-christs. This is why we must be on guard, in Advent – which means 'coming' - and at all times. The Coming One is always coming *within us* – not externalised out there somewhere, and not in our moral uprightness - always rising within the human soul, that temple not made with hands, always coming unexpectedly. ¹³

Be on guard!

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⁸ Mark 14:58 In Matthew the accusation against Jesus is that he said he would rebuild the temple within three days, which is generally reckoned to be reference to his resurrection.

⁹ 1Corinthians 3:16-17

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:19 Literal rendering of the Greek in italics.

¹¹ Matthew 24:39

¹² **Ἐμμανουήλ** *Emmanuel* Matthew 1:23

¹³ Matthew 24:36,39,42,44