

2025 30 Nov., St Luke's

Matt 24:36-44, Romans 13:9-14

Whenever a gospel-writer or letter-writer settled down with a hired scribe and a finite stock of expensive papyrus, he would have a key purpose in mind which would determine what he included. As we would expect, emphases varied among writers. But when they record Jesus's teaching, the gospel-writers all report that Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of heaven. This occurred with increasing urgency as Jesus approached his appointment with the cross. And Paul knows that the coming kingdom has implications for the young churches. How we live our lives on earth matters beyond this life.

Paul is writing to new Christians in the church in Rome. The church has some internal conflict, and they're also facing psychological pressure from outside. - Emperor Nero is starting to show alarming signs of bringing increased persecution.

Like almost all of the early churches, the church in Rome had been founded by mainly Jewish-background believers. But they were now rapidly becoming outnumbered by Gentile converts. When Paul tells these groups of church members to love each other, some of his hearers will recognise what is sometimes called 'younger brother' syndrome. It was familiar to them from the Genesis stories foundational to Jewish cultural awareness. Right back near the dawn of human history, the older Cain murders his brother Abel, being angrily jealous of him because God favours Abel's religious offering.¹ A bit later, Ishmael gets passed over in favour of his younger brother Isaac, who becomes a key Jewish leader.² And a few chapters after that, Esau gets tricked by the younger Jacob for his birthright and his father's blessing.³ None of these key stories had ended with everyone playing happy families. In the absence of murder, about the best they got was an agreement to live separate lives. Yes, older brothers and younger brothers, whether biological or figurative, don't always get on. For the congregations in Rome, the new Gentile converts were clearly the younger brothers. They were enthusiastic, but we could say they sometimes lacked cultural awareness. Into this setting, Paul tells all parties that they just need to re-set their compass, individually and collectively, towards making efforts to love each other as much as they love themselves. Simple really, but not easy.

So imagine we're in Rome when Paul's letter arrives. Believers were gathered together to hear it read out, probably over several sessions. I can imagine the different reactions flitting over their faces when they get to our verse 13. Paul asks them to turn their backs on three pairs of things; Revelling and drunkenness ... 'Well, of course, but that's no problem, not for us, although I have heard that it might be for some people...'

Then he mentions illicit sex and licentiousness... 'Well, what we do isn't immoral of course, but I think he might be talking about the young lady next door; you should have seen what she went out in the other day. I can't imagine so much money to spend on luxuries...'

Then comes quarrelling and jealousy...

¹ Gen 4

² Gen 21

³ Gen. 25

‘Oh. Quarrelling. That’s bickering and picking points of disagreement ...
And jealousy...?’

Suddenly, I’m not so confident that it’s just other people he’s talking about.

Apparently, inter-personal friction dogged the church in Rome. -You don’t say, ‘Don’t do x’ if no-one is doing it. Squabbles often increase as a new organisation gets past the founding stage. I’ve seen it with arts organisations as well as special interest spiritual groups. In the beginning, it’s all friends with energy behind a common cause. But then you discover your own opinions aren’t fully shared by everyone else in your group. Shock, horror. I think that’s why a church split is often followed by another one soon after. In our own times, the internet may have sped up that discontentment process. Sometimes organisation’s websites, even Christian ones, seem to contain more picky disagreements than they do news. And it’s so horribly easy to press click/send on a divisive comment that we might on reflection have kept to ourselves.

But Paul isn’t only wanting the immediate practical benefits of relational harmony. There’s a bigger reason why it matters how we live, a greater goal. He says in verse 12; ‘The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.’ One day, God will call time.

People then didn’t have much concept of how the last days will play out. -Probably about as much as we have! But as they face the threat of persecution, and are fearing the signs of war to come, it seems they could be seeing these coming events as something that will immediately precede the second coming.

It happens. As a child, I overheard some of the adults at church speculating that the end was imminent, signalled by the long-running Cold War, I think. Or sometimes it’s natural events. I remember one day in the 1970s standing with a puzzled group of passers-by in my hometown’s main street in NZ. It was the middle of the day, but there was a weird, smoky sunset-like glow all around us. A worried-looking lady told me, ‘They’re saying it’s the end of the world!’ I just managed not to say, ‘Yes, I think you should do something about that. Report it to the authorities!’ The odd effect was in fact caused by smoke from Australian bush fires getting up between us and the sun.

The lady wasn’t entirely wrong. Neither was Paul. The present era will come to an end. The message in the Matthew reading too is that there will be a second coming, a day of reckoning if you like.

There are two common mistakes about the second coming. The first one is more likely to hit the news. It’s associated mainly with fringe groups whose leader has been personally told by God the date when it will happen. He imparts this privileged knowledge to their followers. On the appointed day they withdraw together to a chosen venue to await the end.-Sometimes, the members first leave their jobs and sell all their property, which seems a bit redundant really. So far at least, the group in question have always emerged a day or two later looking rather embarrassed, often producing a new set of calculations a bit later. (Actually, there’s money in the

end times industry. American Baptist pastor Tim La Haye became very wealthy from the late 1990s from his 'Left Behind' book series and film franchises.)

But I think most mainstream Christians, including Anglicans, are more disposed to a different kind of mistake. We might say, 'It's been so long now that it really looks like we're on our own... Sure, the Bible calls our era the last days, but that seems a bit academic. In the real world, you've got to look after number one.'

If we've initially responded to an invitation to eternity with a 'maybe,' when it came up on our inner spiritual events page, probably it's just never seemed very important. If that's us, it's time, while we still can, to re-visit our response.

If the prospect of meeting God, whether by the second coming or by death, perhaps unexpectedly, raises any niggles in your mind, I'm sure Jo or Don or Samuel would be happy if you ask them to catch up and talk about it. Or you can ask any Christian friend you trust. Be assured, Jesus gave us an open invitation. He tells us, 'Anyone who comes to me, I will never drive away'.⁴ And I can also say, having been here a while now, that I think that's true of this church.

So we say each Sunday in our communion liturgy, 'Christ will come again.' When he returns, may he find us faithful to him, and engaged in the work he has given us to do.

Amen.

⁴ John 6:37