

Advent

All-age

Worship

Out of the blue

Time is a 'key theme' of the Advent season when we look forward both to the coming of Jesus at Christmas and to his final, glorious return at the end of time.

Bible focus

Matthew 24:42-51 (Jesus' parables of the thief and the servants)

Jesus often used daring analogies in his stories. For example, he compared an unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) and a bad-tempered neighbour woken in the night (Luke 11:5-8) with God's readiness to answer prayer. He told of a manager's dishonesty to teach about godly wisdom (Luke 16:1-9). In this Advent reading he likens his return to a crime – a night-time house burglary (cartoon 1).

The 'surprise element' of the comparison helps underline the point Jesus is making: neither event can be exactly predicted, but both can be prepared for. The subsequent parable of the good and bad servants (24:45-51) illustrates how Jesus' listeners should prepare.

Both stories use figures familiar in first-century Palestine. Everyone knew about thieves and servants. Both stories illustrate Jesus' teaching – how and why we should be ready at all times for when he comes again.

Introduction

Show a video clip and freeze the picture just before something dramatic happens – for example, a goal in a football match, a dramatic revelation in *EastEnders*. Alternatively, read part of a story and stop at a 'cliff-hanger' moment. Ask: 'What happens next?'

Both real life and made-up life are full of surprises. We can never be sure what will happen next. That's why we call it 'drama'.

The return of Jesus will certainly be dramatic. Matthew 24 shows Jesus describing some of the events surrounding his return. No one will be able to predict *when* it will take place (not even Jesus knew, according to 24:36). But since we know it *will* happen one day, we should be prepared.

Yes, but how?

Imagine we knew that the Queen was coming to our church today – or, slightly more realistically, that the cameras for *Songs of Praise* were about to arrive. What would we do as a church? Here are some ideas:

- * Have a really good sermon ready
- * Make sure we were looking our best
- * Buy a better brand of coffee than usual for after the service
- * Practise the music even more than normal
- * Roll out a red carpet
- * Pick up all the litter outside, and clean the church until it gleamed
- * Be incredibly friendly to everyone.

Ready, or what? Now imagine that the phone rings just before the service: 'Terribly sorry, we made a mistake. We meant the church down the road.'

After the initial disappointment (or relief), perhaps someone would make the point: 'Perhaps this is what we should be doing *every* Sunday anyway, whether or not the royal person/cameras are coming.'

Jesus is saying that we should be living each day in such a way that we would not need to change anything if he turned up out of the blue.

Drama

Four performers stand with their backs to the audience. The Speaker should be off stage.

Speaker: Attention!

Performer 1 turns round, stands rigidly to attention and salutes. Holds the position.

Speaker: Keep a sharp look-out!

Performer 2 turns around, scans the horizon with a pair of binoculars – and continues to do so.

Speaker: Red alert! Red alert!

Performer 3 turns around and crouches down as if expecting an attack at any moment.

Performer 4 turns around with both arms straight up. Cue sound effect of clock ticking. The performer's arms become the arms of a clock that turn second by second.

Performers 1,2 and 3 gradually lose their alertness, become tired and finally fall asleep.

Speaker: Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:42-51)

Talk

1. Be prepared

Anyone who has been the victim of crime knows how distressing the experience can be. What steps can we take to protect our property and ourselves? Ask for suggestions. Some of the following may emerge:

- * Use a burglar alarm
- * Lock your bike/car when you park it
- * Keep credit cards securely
- * Don't accept lifts from strangers
- * Think carefully about where you walk alone, particularly after dark.

In the first century there were no alarms, cars, bicycles or credit cards. But there were still precautions people could take. What might they be?

- * Don't travel alone on a road known to be a place for robbers.
- * Hire a shepherd to look after your sheep.
- * Don't keep all your valuables in an unlocked house.

There always have been and always will be thieves (Cartoon 1). Being ready for them has always meant doing certain things every day – locking up, taking precautions, and being aware.

In the same way, being ready for Jesus means living wisely each day. To illustrate what this means, think of two people (Cartoon 2):

- * An athlete approaching the starting line of a race
- * A student preparing to take an exam.

For both of them, the outcome will depend on how they have lived many days before the big test. The athlete's training and the student's learning will to a large degree determine their performance. To be ready for Jesus is not about making a big effort at the last moment in order to look good – it's about a heart that is right with God.

2. How do we develop a 'right heart'?

The athlete has trained her body to work in a certain way; the student has trained his mind to think in a certain way. Here's a 'key question' to help us live so that we are ready for Jesus' return: 'If I knew Jesus would see me tomorrow, how would I spend today?'

One task for the head servant or steward of a household (Cartoon 3) was to give the other servants their meals (24:45). The steward fulfilled this duty knowing that it is what his master had delegated to him. Even in the master's absence, he would ask himself – what would the master have me do? Good servants act as if their master is with them all the time.

Every Christian can do the same. 'What would Jesus have me do?' is a brilliant question to ask about everything in which we are involved.

Use that question to check out how you're doing on the following everyday activities. (You might wish to get some children to mime them.)

- * Driving
- * Homework
- * Writing Christmas cards and letters
- * Playing football
- * Shopping

None of these is necessarily any less holy than going to church or reading the Bible. Imagine spending the next few weeks as though Jesus was with us, or in such a way that if he suddenly turned up we wouldn't need to change anything.

3. We can't fool God

Prepare the following items.

- * An unopened can of soft drink. Looks perfect, but has in fact been emptied by means of a couple of tiny holes punched in the base.
- * A can of tinned peaches. On being opened it will turn out to be full of dog food, thanks to a sneaky substitution of labels.
- * An excitingly gift-wrapped Christmas present. Unwrapping will reveal that the box is empty.

Invite volunteers to open the 'gifts'. Each one is a disappointment because it pretended to be something that it wasn't.

Advent is about remembering the God 'unto whom all hearts are open, all desires are known and from whom no secrets are hidden'. In the parable he already knows who is the good and bad servant. No amount of papering over the cracks in our lives will hide the truth from him.

To live every day in his presence (Cartoon 4), receiving his forgiveness and promise of a fresh start, and asking regularly, 'What would Jesus have me do?' – in this way we will be ready for him to return at any moment.

Confession

Now is the time to turn to God and seek his mercy. For we have strayed from his ways like lost sheep, but like a good shepherd he has sought us and saved us, and longs to forgive our sins.

For the ways we have forgotten about living for Jesus and being ready for his return, we are truly sorry.

In your mercy, Lord, forgive us.

For the actions that have angered you, we are truly sorry.

In your mercy, Lord, forgive us.

For the words that have wounded you, we are truly sorry.

In your mercy, Lord, forgive us.

For the thoughts that have betrayed you, we are truly sorry.

In your mercy, Lord, forgive us.

The Bible declares: Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs have been pardoned. To them the Lord says: I will teach you the way you should go.

Be glad and rejoice because of what the Lord has done.

Biography

Jonathan Mortimer is Team Rector of Southgate in Crawley, West Sussex. He serves on CPAS's CYFA advisory committee.