

Two weeks ago, we overheard Jesus begin what scholars call the Olivet Discourse. Do you remember? As they were leaving the Temple courts, an anonymous disciple points to the structures and says, “What great buildings!” Jesus’s reply is curt: “I tell you the truth, the day is coming when not one stone will be left upon the other.” Later, on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple complex, Andrew and Peter press the matter: “When will these things be and what will be the signs.” The answer is this speech.

Jesus, I believe, is talking about the end of the only world the disciples had ever known. The discourse is provoked by a remark about the Temple, and the main subject is the destruction of the Temple. Even the most curious remark about the Abomination of Desolation had to do with the desecration of the Temple by the Greek General Antiochus Epiphanies. And that is certainly how the first followers of Jesus understood the discourse, for when Roman armies began to surround the city, they—following Jesus’s instructions—fled and so were preserved. A world had ended, a new world was born, and the Church was preserved.

Even the more dramatic signs fit that explanation. Cosmological signs is a common trope in the prophetic literature of the Bible. It is a way of emphasizing the significance of the event being described. And, the sign of the Son of Man coming with the clouds may well refer to his coming into his Father’s presence to receive his everlasting Kingdom. After all, that is what Daniel 7, from whence the image comes, is talking about.

Even if Jesus’s words were in some way fulfilled in 70AD when the Temple was destroyed utterly and the Jews dispersed throughout the empire, these are words for us, too. And I’d like to focus our attention to the conclusion of the discourse as it is found, this week, in the Gospel of Luke.

Listen to it again: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

### **Christmas Crazy**

Can I take a guess at, at least, what some of you might be thinking right now? If I’m right, you’re thinking, “Well, fine, Pastor. But what does this have to do with the Christmas Crazy that is dominating my house right now?” Well, let’s think about that a little bit.

Can you imagine a world in which there is no Christmas, at least the way we’ve come to celebrate it? Can you imagine a world in which Christmas is a very small, secretive family meal with none of the glitz and trappings that we take for granted? It’s not impossible. But it’s hard, isn’t it? It’s hard to conceive of a Christmas season that did not involve, say, going to Cliff and Dorothy’s to get a tree. Picking up travelling kids from the airport. Buying the turkey or the ham. Now, imagine the anonymous disciple again “Look at these great buildings!”

Christmas crazy is dominating right now. It’s very hard to conceive of a world where it’s gone. But if we can, even just a little bit, then maybe Jesus will find a chink in our secular armour through which his Gospel can penetrate.

## **Be On Guard!**

Jesus's conclusion is, basically, two commands. Here's the first one: Be On Guard! In other words, be ready to fight! Fight against what? Against enemies seeking to persecute or imprison or coerce blasphemy? No. Jesus does not mention an external enemy (he's done that already. We looked at that two weeks back). Here he mentions internal enemies.

Are you ready for the first one?

Be on guard against dissipation and drunkenness. Huh. Not persecutors. Not militant atheists. Not even the dark powers that really do seek our destruction. Instead, Jesus says, effectively, "Be on guard against the good times!"

The word translated dissipation is an odd one. It appears only once in the New Testament. And that means there's no biblical context which helps elucidate its meaning. When we look outside the New Testament, we find it's a sort of loose word that's not easily translated. The best translation is in fact a phrase: "the giddiness that comes with too much alcohol."

Perhaps we could say, the first feelings of light-headed happiness that comes when you are just on the verge of drinking too much.

Drunkenness is more straightforward, isn't it?

Be on guard against dissipation and drunkenness. Be on guard, in other words, against the good times that lull us into sleepiness. Be on guard against all those influences that might make you too comfortable with this world. Be on guard against things that are, in themselves, perfectly good, but can distract you from the most important thing! Be on guard against the fun of Christmas Crazy.

OK. Be on guard against the drowsiness that sneaks in with good times. What else?

Be on guard also against the worries of this life. Interesting eh? We can not only be lulled to sleep by the good times and also overwhelmed by the bad times. Either way, we can be distracted from the signs, from the lesson of the fig tree, from the sign of the coming of the Son of Man.

Be on guard against the worries of this life. The worries of credit card debt. The worries of physical and mental suffering. The worries provoked by the wars and rumours of wars and the other beginning of the birth pangs that Jesus spoke of two weeks ago. If you're not on guard, they'll overwhelm you and distract you from the day of the Lord.

When you see them, don't be overwhelmed, but lift up your head your redemption that drawing is near!

## **Be Alert!**

The second command sounds like a repeat of the first: Be Alert! The English Standard Version translates the phrase this way: "Stay awake at all times." You might think of the second command as a positive version of the first, negative one. If the first command might be rendered, "Don't go to sleep!" the second might be "Stay Awake!"

And how do you stay awake? Jesus is clear: Pray.

Let's stop there for a moment. We don't think of prayer as a means of staying awake. Rather prayer is what we do to go to sleep. What on earth does Jesus mean?

Prayer is the means by which we wrench ourselves out of the drowsiness that comes with good times even as much it is the means by which we brace ourselves against the worries that overwhelm. Prayer pulls us out of the distractions of this world so that we can see the world with God's eyes. So that we can see the world as it really is.

Of course that means that prayer is not just rhyming off the laundry list of thanksgivings, needs, and wants before our head hits the pillow. It means that prayer is the deliberate setting aside of time and space for a conversation with God. Not a monologue of us ticking boxes before a Cosmic Santa Claus. Not a monologue of God giving us instructions for daily life as we read the Bible. It is a conversation. That involves speaking and listening on both sides.

Prayer—deliberate, regular, concentrated conversation with God—will change the way we see things. It will affect our ability to attend to the world. Far from being a run from the world, prayer gives us skills to see that our technological world has taken away from us with its deliberate shortening of our attention spans and atrophying our capacity to concentrate. So, Jesus says, Pray!

Jesus continues. Pray for two specific things. Pray first of all for strength to escape. The end, whatever that means, whether we mean the end of our civilization (this is what happened to the disciples), or the end of our lives (which will come to us all), or the end of the world (it has to come some time), the end will be difficult.

The temptation to drown out its pain in the illusions of wealth or to succumb to the worries that it would produce will be strongest on that day—however that day comes to us. Pray to escape.

Don't just pray to escape, but also pray to stand before the Son!

There is something we should be more alarmed about than the end of civilization, the end of our own life, even the end of the world. And that is the One before whom we will stand immediately after that world ends. When the Son of Man comes with the holy angels, will we be able to stand before the Son of Man? Will we be able to stand before the one who will separate the sheep from the goats, as is spoken of in Matthew 25? Will we be able to stand when he comes in the clouds with power and great glory and—in the haunting language of the prophet Daniel—on the day when the books will be opened and we will all give an account?

Be on guard against the distractions—good and bad—of this life. Be alert! Pray for strength to escape and strength to stand!

### **What is Advent**

What better advice to cure us from the Christmas Crazy and allow us to enter into Advent!

Advent is a time of preparation and it is a time of penitence. It is a time of getting ready by attending to the ways that we are not yet ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

So, what do you need to be on guard against? What good things are lulling you to sleep? What bad things are overwhelming you? If you need to, today, take out a pen and write out a list.

Be alert! Pray! What's keeping you from wanting to escape the trappings and baubles and fakery of the world? What's keeping you from wanting to escape to the coming Kingdom? Pray! What's keeping you from being able to stand before the Son when he comes?

Far more than prolonging Christmas by four weeks (as though the church should emulate the world by getting Christmas stuff up as soon as All Saints' Day is over). Advent is a time to get ready. A time to hone those habits that should be in place year round so that when the Son of Man comes in power and great glory, we will be ready! Having been on guard, we will be awake, alert, prayed up and ready.

The King is coming friends. He may come in the end of a culture. He may come in the hour of our death. He may come in a way that every eye sees. However he comes, he is coming. And he's coming for you.