

[Matthew 24:36-44](#)

A few months ago, Debbie and I went to the G Live venue in Guildford to see a concert by a band that had been popular in the 1970s, namely 10cc. Like many such bands today, there was only one original member left, the rest mainly having been replaced over the years by talented but not well-known session musicians.

They launched the concert with a track from one of their biggest albums, 'The Original Soundtrack.' It was a song called 'The Second Sitting For The Last Supper.' The lyrics mock the fact that Jesus has not returned, as he promised, and meanwhile the world continues to go to hell in a handcart.

Two thousand years and he ain't come yet
We kept his seat warm and the table set
The second sitting for the Last Supper¹

And it may be that the doctrine of the Second Coming of Jesus, which we traditionally mark on Advent Sunday, is one that has brought Christianity into disrepute. For one thing, we have proclaimed that Jesus is coming back but he hasn't. For another, some Christians and some cults have predicted dates for his return, only to be proved wrong when the date passed. Further, it has been used to scare people into following Jesus, making them fearful disciples rather than full of love.

But for all of that, we shouldn't throw it out. Misuse isn't an argument for disuse; it's an argument for right use.

And in fact, although the event is often hyped up by many, I want to focus in today on the ordinariness of the circumstances leading up to it.

So the **first** point I want to make today is about **the lack of signs**.

Many people who write or speak about the Second Coming will talk about all sorts of portents in the heavens or in earthly events. As a young Christian, I got caught up in all that. I remember enthusiastically talking about how I thought the Second Coming was close when I was a teenager, and cited writers who said that one sign of the lead-up would be a crisis in the Middle East.

Someone in my youth group quickly put me in my place. "There is always a crisis in the Middle East," they said.

How else do you interpret Jesus saying,

³⁶ 'But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'?

If Jesus doesn't know when he's appearing again, how can he detail any signs? Yes, there are signs he speaks about earlier in this chapter, but they all relate to the coming fall of Jerusalem to Roman armies in AD 70. Remember that this whole conversation began when the disciples asked Jesus two questions rolled into one:

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. 'Tell us,' they said, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'

'When will this happen?' is about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, because Jesus had just mentioned it. Then the second question is about Jesus' coming again and the end of the age, which is what Jesus begins to answer in today's reading.

No signs. Don't look for them. Don't think that the time when you have to get your life together is when spectacular signs indicate that Jesus is going to return soon. It won't be like that.

And that leads us to our **second point: people will be living ordinary lives.**

³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

Life will just be continuing fairly normally. In the biblical story of the Flood, no-one has a clue except Noah about the disaster soon to befall the ancient world. So people just chug along as they always did.

Today, in a time of declining Christianity, at least in the West, fewer and fewer people therefore live with the expectation and hope we have. People go through the ordinary motions of life as best they can. For many, there is little more to life than that, even if they try on occasion to do something that feels good and worthwhile.

Debbie and I saw a version of that recently. We went to see the acclaimed musical play 'Girl From The North Country.' It features the songs of Bob Dylan,

which was the attraction for me. They are given startling new arrangements and sung brilliantly by the cast. But the actual play in which they are set is bleak. It is a story of ordinary townsfolk in Duluth, Minnesota (Dylan's hometown) in 1934 (a few years before Dylan was born – he doesn't feature in the story). As we watch their lives unfold and then hear the summary at the end, we discover that most of them have lived and died in a sense of hopelessness.

When the play finished, there was thunderous applause. Several audience members gave the cast a standing ovation. And it was well done. But there was no hope, no redemption.

And today, that's how many people live. They may be periodically happy, but there is little sense of hope other than a folk belief that when they die they think they will be reunited with their loved ones.

It will be into a world like that, painted in grey and flavoured with vanilla, that Jesus will come again.

But that day will come, says Jesus, and it will be like when an army invades and takes some people away:

⁴⁰Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

It's not that the righteous will be taken away to heaven as in the questionable doctrine of 'The Rapture' which some Christians teach. Those who are taken away are those who are judged and found wanting. The righteous are left behind on the earth that God will renew.

So what is to be done to be among the righteous?

Well, that's our **third** and final point: **the way to prepare is to be watchful and ready.**

⁴²'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

But how can you be watchful and ready if there are no signs of Christ's coming and that he's just as likely to come again in the middle of ordinariness rather than in cataclysmic times?

Well, it all depends what Jesus means by 'watch' and 'be ready.' Watchfulness and readiness are images of the ethical quality of our lives in following Jesus.

In other words, if we want to be ready for the coming of Jesus, it's simple. We need to get on with doing the right things. Some of that may look like the ordinariness of the people who will be caught out, hence Martin Luther's famous quote,

'If I knew Jesus was coming tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree and collect the rent.'

But it's about doing everything that is consistent with being a disciple of Jesus. It's about being a faithful servant of the Master, something Jesus goes on to speak about next.

So once more, there's no need to be spectacular. There is no reason to engage in lurid speculation. The key to being ready for the coming of Jesus is a form of spiritual ordinariness. We read the Gospels to learn what Jesus wants of his disciples, and then that's what we set our minds, hearts, and wills to doing.

We'll still be shocked and surprised when he turns up, but we'll be ready for life in the new heaven and new earth.

¹ Words and music: Lol Creme, Graham Gouldman, Kevin Godley, Eric Stewart, published by Man-Ken Music, 1975.