

Gospel reading for the **first Sunday in Advent** Dec 1st 2019

[Matthew 24:36-44](#)

No-one knows the hour.

This week we begin a new set of lectionary readings, being Year A of the 3-year cycle. Apart from some deviations for special occasions (often into John's Gospel which does not have its own lectionary focus), the Year A cycle predominantly follows Matthew's Gospel, with the season of Advent marking the beginning of the new church year.

Now I have to get this off my chest! It's no wonder that many Christian people and society in general, have a warped image of God. I don't think readings of this nature are helpful to nurturing a positive image of a loving, caring God. OK, I concede that occasionally we need to be reminded about the day and the hour that is to come, but it often seems to be accompanied by fear-based images of a remote, judgemental God, poised ready to strike. If people on the street were to hear this reading today, would they see behind this a God of love who operates only by grace?

The Gospel reading for this week is problematic because we have been given a mere paragraph out of a major final campaign speech by Jesus, spanning virtually three long chapters. It is difficult to see behind these few verses to appreciate the gift of grace that Jesus is ushering in here. It seems that the lectionary designers have pulled a media stunt - they have chosen a little segment of a major speech in isolation, to create an impression that is not really representative of the magnificent bigger picture message.

When we meet the selection of readings for Advent, the theme is invariably one of **coming** ... in various forms – in human form as a baby at Bethlehem, and His coming again at some time in the future. But amongst all of the **coming**, we need to remember that God's kingdom is already here, that grace has already come to us through the finished work of Jesus! So let's also put some emphasis on the here and now ... Jesus with us each day, every step of the way, right now!

Yes this passage does bid us not just to wait, but to keep awake and to watch and to be prepared. Regardless of how we feel about an apocalyptic reading of this nature, just maybe it provides us with rather good advice as we launch into Advent. There is so much that can distract us from the life of faith, from service to those in need around us, from recognising and being mindful of God in our midst. If we're honest, we might admit that the frenetic decorating and shopping, food preparations, card and present giving that consumes us during the course of the next four weeks, can easily become part of what side-tracks us. We end up preparing for Christmas rather than for Christ and thereby are likely to easily miss the presence of our Lord in the face of those in need.

The Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus will come again at a time that will take us by surprise. The real surprise though, may well be to find out that He has been here all along!

As we move closer to the end of another school year, may our focus be drawn to the ongoing presence of Jesus, here with us right now. May our celebrations also focus on the gift of grace that we already have!

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