



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Dr Tim Howles

Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

Introduction

Welcome to the season of Advent!

In the weeks ahead, we will prepare to look back, to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, two-thousand years ago, a baby born in a stable, God-with-us.

But during Advent, we don't just look back to the first coming of Christ. We also look forward to His second coming as judge at the end of time.

Now, there's no doubt that the idea of the second coming of Christ is a difficult one for modern ears to grasp. It sounds strange; it sounds weird; perhaps it even sounds a little fanatical!

But this doctrine is not something that is peripheral to Scripture. The second coming of Christ is mentioned 318 times in the NT; once every thirteen verses. And it should not be peripheral to the lives of Christians. Every week, as we recite the creed, we declare our belief that Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead". This doctrine is central to our faith. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that you can't live a recognisably Christian life unless you believe in the second coming of Christ and unless you let this doctrine shape your life and behaviour in significant ways.

What do I mean?

I'm going to keep this sermon really practical and concrete and down-to-earth. I'd like to give you just a couple of areas in which the doctrine of the second coming of Christ should make a difference in our lives. And I hope these are concrete things that we can take away, think about and apply in the weeks ahead.

1. The doctrine of the second coming of Christ provides hope in the midst of suffering

In Matthew 24, just before our Gospel reading, there is the famous story about Jesus and the fig-tree. Jesus is on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem and He sees a fig-tree growing in the hard ground. And as He looks at it, he says to his disciples: "learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near" (Matt 24:32).

The fig-tree was one of the only shrubs in that region that lost its leaves in the winter. And so when you saw the buds and fruit growing again, when they began to appear, you would know that spring had arrived and summer was surely on its way.

We don't need reminding that this world is not all it should be. There is suffering, there is illness, there is disease.

And in our heart of hearts, all of us long for the day when that will be put right.

The Bible tells us: that day is coming. Just as the first shoots of the fig tree declare of the end of the winter months, so Jesus declares that in Him the cold season is beginning to recede. Jesus says: "I am the one who is bringing spring to this world. And one day, I will come again to announce that summer is finally here. And on that day, the darkness and cold will be no more, and the whole Earth will be flooded with light".

You see, in Jesus' life and ministry we see signs of restoration and renewal. The sick are healed, the blind see, the lame are made to walk. But what we see in glimpses in His first coming will be made manifest in all its glory when He comes again. On that day, He will bring restoration and renewal to all things. As is written in the prophet Jeremiah: "on that day, declares the Lord, I will bring health and healing to my people; they will enjoy abundant peace and security" (Jeremiah 33:6).

For all who are suffering now, for all who feel the cold grip of winter upon your shoulder, that promise is for you.

The second coming of Jesus Christ is good news for people whose lives are filled with bad news. Those who have experienced the death of a child from cancer; those who have suffered the breakdown of their marriage; those who are refugees, lost and far from home; those whose bodies are wracked with chronic pain—these people don't yawn and turn their heads when somebody mentions the second coming of Christ. For people like that, a light glints in their eyes and they say: *Oh that he would come quickly. Might it even be today?*

I've only been with you here at St Andrew's for a couple of years, so perhaps I don't have the full perspective. But I have a sense that particularly in this last twelve months we in this community have gone through a winter season of our own. There have been diagnoses of illnesses. There have significant challenges in family life. There have been funerals of those we didn't expect to lose so early. Just this week someone said to me: "life feels so hard; I can't see where God is in all of this".

Brothers and sisters, take heart. He is coming again to make all things right. May that be the anchor of your souls at this difficult time. And so let us hold fast to what it says 1 John chapter 2: "dear children, continue in him, so you will be confident and unashamed when he comes again" (1 John 2:28).

2. The doctrine of the second coming of Christ is able to remould our relationships with other people

I'd like to get even more concrete and practical now. I'd like to suggest that the doctrine of the second coming of Christ makes a difference not only to ourselves at times of suffering, but also to our relationships with others.

And in particular, I'd like to think about times when we need to forgive and make peace with those who have wronged us.

When you're hurt by someone—when someone mistreats you, or ignores you, or gossips about you—if you're anything like me, the instinct is to act as judge and jury. Do you recognise that feeling? We know what they did. We know what they deserve. And we feel ready to dish out the punishment ourselves! Our impulse is to rush to the judgment seat and pronounce a verdict.

But that's where poison takes root in our community. When we do that, when we assume the role of judge and jury over someone else, tempers rise, positions harden, long-term damage is done.

Why? Because, we're not meant to sit on that judgment seat. It's too big for us. Yes, we may have been wronged. But we don't know the full story.

About a month ago, a friend of mine came to me with a complaint about another person. And they described with great relish how this person had wronged them, how unreasonable they had been and why they deserved to be ignored and left in the cold. And as I listened, I thought to myself: your depiction of that person does not reflect at all how I see them, and I think others too. Sure there had been a problem. But there had been a rush to judgment. And in my friend's mind, things had become so twisted and distorted that they had almost de-humanised the other person, as if they were deserving of nothing else but condemnation.

That's how our relationship get broken beyond repair.

What can heal us from that?

The doctrine of the second coming tells us that only God has the power and the knowledge and the right to sit on that judgment seat. Do you have a grievance against someone? Maybe. But give that over to God. He knows the ins-and-the-outs; you don't. He knows what that person deserves, given their background, their circumstances, their unique challenges in life; you don't. Give over your bitterness to him. One day, he will put everything right. He will. In the meantime, knowing how much he has forgiven us, we can entrust all that to him. "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God, for it is written: "it is mine to avenge; I will be the one to repay", says the Lord" (Rom 12:19).

The doctrine of the second coming of Christ is a balm that soothes our squabbles and arguments. We can give all these up to Him. And, knowing how much we have been forgiven in Christ, we can get on with the business of forgiving others, and living in peace and harmony in this community.

There are just two areas in which thinking about this doctrine should make a difference. There are many more. What does the second coming of Christ mean for our mission as a church? What does it mean for social justice and care for the world around us? What does it imply about the future of God's creation and role in it? Why not think more about this? Why not use the time over coffee not to complain about the weather or the General Election, but to ask each other what you think? Perhaps a few might consider meeting up sometime in a small group to study this further; I'd gladly be a part of that if that would help. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds [...] encouraging one another—and all the more as we see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

And in the meantime, as our Gospel reading made clear, we are called to be ready.

Here's how C. S. Lewis puts it in his very great essay *The World's Last Night*:

The return of Christ is wholly unpredictable. And so we must be ready at all times. Let us ask ourselves more and more often how the thing which

we are saying or doing (or failing to do) at each moment will look when the irresistible light streams in upon it; that light which is so different from the light of this world and yet, even now, we know just enough of it to take it into account.

One day the Lord Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. The irresistible light will stream in.

Are you ready? Are you living in such a way that you'd rejoice to see him? In ten years time? In one years time? Tonight? Have you put your faith in Christ as your hope and comfort when that day arrives? Can you say with confidence those closing words of the book of Revelation: "Amen. Come Lord Jesus"?

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matt 24:42).

May it be so for us.

Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 01 December 2019, Advent Sunday