

Advent 1: Holy Suspense

Mark 13: 24-37

Who likes to be on the edge of their seat when they are watching a film? Or it might be a book or a television programme. It might be you on a Sunday evening watching the Strictly Come Dancing Results to see who's been eliminated, or on Tuesday as we waited to find out who would be crowned the winner of The Great British Bake Off 2020. Why is it that there's always that *long* wait before they announce the result? I guess it's to build tension – to have us sitting on the edge of our seats, in anticipation of the outcome.

Tension is a powerful force, isn't it? It moves stories forward, making us want to keep turning the pages of a book, unable to put it down, or keeping our eyes glued to a film in suspense. Tension is also powerful in creating physical movement – think about a bow and arrow. It's no use having a loose, relaxed bow string; you need the tension to make the arrow fly. Or think about the strings of a guitar, or the skin on a drum. You have to pull at both ends to create the resonant sound.

The problem is, often tensions are uncomfortable. If we know two people are having an argument with differing points of view, we will say that we can feel the tension in the room. Tension asks us to hold in balance two things which seem to be opposing each other, and that can be a challenge. This is often true when we try and wrestle with some of the big questions of the Christian faith. Is God our friend, or is he our judge? Is God close to us, or holy and other? Is God in charge, or do we have free will? When questions like this get too much for us, we often give up and collapse the tension, rather than try to wrestle with the apparent contradictions and to find creative power in the midst of them.

Today we begin the season of Advent. We know that Advent means 'coming'. The 'coming' of Jesus refers to his first coming as a baby 2000 years ago. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus kicked off the Kingdom of God on earth. This was the beginning of the kingly rule and reign of God which had been long promised by the prophets. It might have looked very different to what people had expected, but it made a transforming difference in the lives of everyone who responded to it.

At the same time, the fullness of Jesus' Kingdom won't be complete until he comes again. As well as the first coming of Jesus as a human baby, there is also

a Second Advent, a 'second coming' of Jesus. This is a clear expectation which the New Testament church had: that Jesus would come again. Jesus himself speaks of:

“The Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” (Mark 13: 26)

After Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension back to his Father’s side, the angels explain to the disciples:

“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1: 11)

This belief in the return of Jesus shapes the whole of the New Testament understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and how we are to live in the world as we anticipate it.

In Romans chapter 13, Paul encourages us to be aware of the ‘time’ in which we live. He says this:

“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.”
(Romans 13: 11-12)

Imagine that you wake up early on the day of a great party – it could be your birthday, a wedding, or Christmas Day. The night before is almost over, the sun is beginning to come up. You’re full of excitement – and yet, the party itself has not yet started. In this situation, you begin to live with both the anticipation of the day being almost here and frustration that it has not yet fully begun. You would begin to put on your party clothes and do all you could to make final preparations. But you would hold that in tension knowing that the party in all its fullness was still a few hours away.

This is the ‘time’ we live in as Christians. The night is almost gone and the day of Jesus’ Kingdom has started to dawn. And yet, that Kingdom ‘day’ has not yet arrived in all its fullness. We live with the suspense that the full party has not yet started. Paul tells us to be aware that we are living in this ‘time’, this in-between daybreak stage.

This is a huge tension in the Christian life, sometimes called the ‘*now and not yet*’ of the Kingdom:

Now Jesus is King, and at the same time his Kingdom is *not yet* here in its fullness.

Now Satan is defeated, and at the same time we are waiting for all evil to be finally overcome and so our lives are *not yet* free from temptation.

Now Jesus has healed the sick and has given us authority to do the same in his name, and at the same time we live in an era where all sick people are *not yet* healed.

Now Jesus is resurrected from the dead and we are seated with him in the heavenly places, and at the same time we live in the *not yet*, where all creation groans to be healed and resurrected.

This 'now' and 'not yet' calls us to a radical form of living. It asks us to be both hope-filled and also realistic. Life is not all roses and sunshine this side of Jesus' second coming. We all struggle with pain, temptation, disappointment and loss. The earth continues to groan, the oppressed continue to cry '*How long?*' And yet, in the middle of these challenging realities, we have seen the sun beginning to rise and we are called to live in its light.

How then do we live in these times? Paul continues the passage from Romans with this appeal:

"So then, let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light... clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." (Romans 13: 12-14)

When we know a party is coming, we need to put on our party clothes and prepare all we can for the coming celebration. Similarly, when we know Jesus is coming, we need to put on our Jesus clothes – for example, the '*Armour of God*' (Ephesians 6) and attitudes like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3: 12). Jesus reminded his disciples at the end of our gospel passage today that that nobody knows the time of his return, and, because of that, we should:

"Keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (Mark 13: 35-37)

Jesus asks us to live in a holy suspense – ready for his return. Maybe, during the first week of Advent, we could all reflect on whether we are living lives which anticipate God's eternity and celebrate what is best for us, for the people around us, and the world which God has made. And, if not, what do we each need to do to live lives which make us ready for his return?