

# Eternal Vigilance

Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent

28 November 2010

You know these days that have come to be called “where-were-you-when” days? For instance, where were you when Kennedy was shot? Where were you when the first man landed on the moon? Where were you when 9-11 happened?

I wonder if, last Monday, Peterborough had its very own “where-were-you-when” day? Where were you when the gas leak happened? Most people in our city will remember where they were when they first heard that roaring sound and wondered what it was. I was just having my breakfast and thought the noise was coming from the construction site for the new hospital road which is quite close to our home. But it wasn’t until my son, Russell, who lives very close to Brealey and Lansdowne, landed on our doorstep as a noise-and-odour refugee that I found out what it was. And he brought the dog with him – a little Boston terrier who is the same size as our cat – and there was a face-off! Both glowering at each other like prize-fighters at a boxing match! Where were you and what were you doing when the big gas leak happened? Will people still be asking each other that question 50 years from now?

Quite a few people with whom I have been talking this week complained how the gas leak messed up their routine. They had plans for the day. Places to go. People to see. Appointments to keep. But these were disrupted, they said, by the side-effects and knock-on consequences of the gas leak. I reminded them, however, to have a little sympathy for the poor backhoe driver who hit the gas pipe. Just think how it must have ruined his day as, afterwards, he muttered over and over again to himself, “Call before you dig. Call before you dig.”

Don’t we hate those times when everything is going swimmingly, the universe is unfolding according to plan, all is under control – and, just as we are starting to whistle a happy tune, something comes along to spoil our day? Something rains on our parade. One moment we are flying high, then suddenly something happens to bring us down to earth with a crash.

Isn’t it something like that in these early days of Advent? Just as we are getting into the festive spirit. We are just beginning to cosy up to Christmas. Settling into the soporific sentimentality of the season. Looking forward to the comfortable familiarity of age-old traditions. Beginning to put up lights. Sending out Christmas cards. Ah, yes, we sing to ourselves, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

Then we come to church on a Sunday like this. And what do we hear? Not gentle tales of donkeys and stables and a prince of peace. But a seemingly alien dimension of Advent. A dimension we don’t really want to hear about. A dimension that has to do with, of all things, the Apocalypse,

with the end times.

And it brings with it a harsh message, a frightening message, a mind-boggling message. A message of terrible things to come. A message that intrudes on our traditional Christmas frame-of-mind and ruins that warm and comfortable feeling we have at this time of the year.

But, when we delve more deeply into the historic meaning of this season, we find that, in actual fact, the end times is not out of place at Advent but integral to our understanding and celebration of this time of the year as we look towards Christmas. One writer says, “in Advent, the real emphasis is not on getting ready for Jesus’ birth. Because Jesus has already been born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. The real emphasis in Advent is on getting ready for Jesus’ return on the last day.”<sup>1</sup>

So, in this passage assigned by the Common Lectionary for the First Sunday in Advent<sup>2</sup> – the “Little Apocalypse” as it is called because of its similarity to prophetic writings in Daniel and Revelation<sup>3</sup> – we abruptly come face to face with the stark images of the end times. “In the days after that time of trouble the sun will grow dark, the moon will no longer shine, the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in space will be driven from their courses. Then the Son of Man will appear ...”<sup>4</sup> Just when we thought this time of the year was only for meditating on the past and pondering Christ’s coming to Bethlehem so long ago, suddenly we are challenged to think that it’s not only that but also very much about Christ’s Second Coming.

And, if the Bible is to be believed, the Second Coming is not all that far-off in the future. It could happen any moment. Right now, perhaps. Or tomorrow or the next day. So we have to be eternally vigilant. We have to be on the lookout. “Be on watch,” says Jesus, “be alert, for you do not know when the time will come!”<sup>5</sup>

But what does it mean to watch? What does it mean to be vigilant for the coming of Jesus in today’s world? In the movie *Mrs. Brown*, Queen Victoria is sunk in a deep depression after the death of her husband, Albert, when her advisers – confused about to do to help her – come up with an idea. They send for her pony to be brought to Balmoral, accompanied by a handsome Scot named, John Brown. The Queen, though, is not interested in being cheered up, and is infuriated when she looks out on to the royal courtyard to see John Brown standing to attention beside her saddled pony. Day after day, she refuses to go down. Day after day, Brown returns. Finally, she sends a messenger to tell him she is not now and will never be interested in riding the pony. John Brown is unmoved. “When her majesty does wish to ride,” he says quietly, “I shall be ready.”<sup>6</sup>

Watching for Jesus means, then, waiting patiently for the right time. Standing by at the ready, no matter how long

it takes.

But being ready for the coming of our Lord is not just a matter of waiting passively for something that may or may not happen. It is actively preparing for Christ' imminent arrival. Just as in the parable when Jesus says, "It will be like a man who goes away from home on a trip ...", leaving the servants in charge. "Watch, then," he warns, "because you do not know when the master of the house is coming."<sup>7</sup> So we have got to act constantly as if he were going to step through the door at any moment.

Some years ago, a tourist was travelling along the shores of Lake Como in northern Italy. When he reached the castle, Villa Asconatli, an elderly gardener opened the gate and showed him the grounds that he kept in immaculate condition. The tourist asked when the owner had last been there. "Twelve years ago," The man answered. "Does he ever write to you?" the tourist asked. "No," was the reply. "Then from whom do you get your instructions?" "From his agent in Milan." "Does he come at all?" "Never." "Who comes here then?" "I am almost always alone," said the gardener, "only once in a while does a tourist like yourself come by." "But," said the man, "You keep these grounds just as if you expect your master to come tomorrow." "Not tomorrow, sir," the old gardener promptly corrected him. "Today. I expect him today."<sup>8</sup>

Watching, waiting, being alert for the return of the Master is therefore not a passive activity. It is actively doing those things that he would want to find us doing if he were to arrive at any moment.

In his commentary on Mark's Gospel, Lamar Williamson Jr. tells the story of an eclipse that occurred 200 years ago in colonial new England while state legislators were meeting one day. The men were panicked and several moved to adjourn during the blackout. "But one of them said, 'Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. [But] if it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. So I move that candles be brought in and we continue with our work."<sup>9</sup>

We watch and wait for Jesus, therefore, by doing our duty. Living and working faithfully as Christians. Being kind. Being patient. Being tolerant. Being forgiving. Going the second mile. Refusing to pay back evil for evil. Living sacrificially for others. Seeing all people as God's children. Working to bring in God's kingdom by stretching out our hands to those in need. In our own community. Around the world. Doing all these kinds of things – and more – are our ways of watching. Our ways of being alert. Our ways of being eternally vigilant. Doing those very things we would want Jesus to find us doing when he comes back.

Then, again, what if the end times are already here? What if Christ has even now returned, albeit disguised and not immediately recognisable? Just think! He may be right in front of you. Staring you in the face. And you just don't recognise him. So keep alert! Be eternally vigilant.

And remember he may just be facing you in the least

likely of all the people you meet this Christmas time. Do you know that homeless man or that woman panhandler you pass on the street every day or that hungry teenager or decrepit old fellow you see at the community kitchen? Treat him and her with a new respect. You never know exactly who they might turn out to be!

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St. Paul's Presbyterian Church

Peterborough, Ontario

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<sup>1</sup> C. Edward Bowen, "It's Not The End Of The World Yet", [www.sermonmall.com/99/nov99](http://www.sermonmall.com/99/nov99).

<sup>2</sup> The Common Lectionary, Year B. 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent

<sup>3</sup> The term is really given to the longer passage Mark 13:3-37; cf. Donald Juel, "Exegesis: Mark 13:24-37 November 28, 1999 [www.lectionary.com](http://www.lectionary.com) and Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching Through The Christian Year*, Year B (Trinity Press International, 1993) p.6

<sup>4</sup> Mark 13:24 [Today's English Version] Matthew 24:36 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 13:32-37

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Keep Conscious", *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 27, No. 4, p.38

<sup>7</sup> Mark 13:34

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.