

Matthew 24:1-14

A young woman brings home her fiancée to meet her parents. After dinner, her mother tells her father to find out about the young man.

The father invites the fiancée to his study for a drink.

“So what are your plans?” the father asks the young man.

“I am a Torah scholar.” he replies.

“A Torah scholar. Hmm,” the father says. “admirable, but what will you do to provide a nice house for my daughter to live in, as she’s accustomed to?”

“I will study,” the young man replies, “and God will provide for us.”

“And how will you buy her a beautiful engagement ring, such as she deserves?” asks the father.

“I will concentrate on my studies,” the young man replies, “God will provide for us.”

“And children?” asks the father. “How will you support children?”

“Don’t worry, sir, God will provide,” replies the fiancée.

The conversation proceeds like this, and each time the father questions, the young idealist insists that God will provide.

Later, the mother asks, “How did it go, Honey?”

The father answers, “He has no job and no plans, but the good news is he thinks I’m God!”

Intro

It's only the beginning of November, yet I wonder if you have already made any plans for Christmas? Perhaps you are

already thinking about it, or perhaps you think it's too early. In our house, as in many clergy households, nobody is allowed to mention the dreaded 'C' word too early on in the year, but sometimes necessity takes over and we've already talked about our plans for 'C'. In fact just at the beginning of this week Bryony and I sat down and sorted out who was doing what over the Christmas period, and although we didn't make a decision, Anita and I had a conversation about parents and Christmas day.

Sometimes you come across people who are ultra organised, people who have already bought Christmas presents, cards and decided what they would like to do and who they want to invite for Christmas. But then there are some who get fed-up with being asked if they have bought any presents yet. Surely the week before Christmas is soon enough and isn't it better to enjoy Bonfire Night or football on the telly, and worry about Christmas when the time comes.

Some people are planners and they like to have their world under control. They like things predictable, so they get things organised well ahead of time. Whilst other people prefer to go with the flow and too much planning makes them cross. They like to be surprised and too much planning means there's no room for spontaneity.

Thankfully, we are all different even though that can bring frustration when people don't work in the same way as our own preferred style.

Gospel

In our Gospel reading, Jesus' disciples want to pin him down. He has been talking about things which they don't understand. He has been talking darkly about destruction and violence to come, and all this talk has made them anxious. They are in Jerusalem, and there's a sense of mounting opposition to Jesus from those in power. The authorities have done their best to trick Jesus by posing questions about the Jewish Law and traditions, but rather than fall into their trap Jesus has cleverly turned the questions round and in turn questioned the practices and Laws of those who are in power. But in doing so, Jesus has put himself in a dangerous position and the disciples are beginning to wonder what will happen to him, and indeed to themselves, if he pushes the authorities too far.

Disciples

Up to this point it has been a good adventure. Jesus befriended the disciples, this bunch of mismatched people and they went on a walkabout, travelling around meeting lots of different people. They soaked up the things Jesus has taught them, they have seen

miracles and have been amazed by God's power working through Jesus. They have felt the excitement of their dreams being fulfilled, and there has been no need to think too hard about the future. But now it is all getting serious and becoming a bit of a challenge. They come out of the Temple with Jesus and together they turn to look at it as they walk away - this huge building with its great walls, the courtyards and porticos, this great symbol of God's presence on earth, and Jesus says, "Yes, you may well look at these walls, but I tell you, not one single stone here will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down."

Moments later as they sit down to gather their thoughts, it all becomes too much for the disciples to take in. "When?" they ask. "How? Will there be some warning?" The answer is not what they want to hear. They are looking for answers, a way of predicting what is going to happen in the future, but Jesus tells them that all the predictions will be wrong. They want to know that God will sort everything out very soon, but Jesus tells them they have a long time to wait. They want to be reassured about their future, but Jesus offers them a future full of effort, struggle and suffering. They want to receive guidance, but Jesus warns them that any future guidance they are offered in the future is likely to be false. The only certainty about the future for the disciples is the task ahead of them

- to teach the Good News about the Kingdom to the ends of the earth.

In the next few weeks we'll see that Jesus goes on to tell his disciples stories about being ready - like bridesmaids with spare lamp oil, like the workers who get on with the job even when the boss is not looking and the householder who is awake and ready for when the burglar breaks in. Jesus' followers are asked to get on with life but be ready and waiting to meet the risen Christ at any moment.

Tee-shirt

A few years ago I bought this tee-shirt because it really caught my eye and I think in some ways it's quite amusing. It says: 'Look busy Jesus is coming'.

I like it because the humour suggests that everybody is somehow looking over their shoulder, like naughty school children keeping a lookout for the head teacher coming round the corner. But I also don't like it because of the negative messages that kind of idea portrays. The idea that somehow Jesus is sneaking about, waiting round a corner to jump out when we least expect him, catching us out for doing something we shouldn't. That's not the God I know, the one who is vengeful, trying to catch us out, so that he can bring

down his rightful punishment to bear upon us. Yes, we should look for Jesus' return, but not with fear looking over our shoulder, just rather living with joy filled, expectant lives.

Perhaps it is out of fear that for thousands of years people have been trying to predict the future and even now there are still those who want to plan for the end of the world, like making plans for Christmas. Sometimes people search for signs in the Bible and elsewhere, trying to fix a date so they can be ready. But just as Jesus words were a warning to his disciples, all we can do is wait and be ready. The world has more story to come, and we have no way of knowing whether that story will last days, years or even thousands more years.

That can be quite hard for us to bear, it is only human to be uncomfortable with uncertainty. We want to believe that God will fulfil his purposes for the world, but often we would like more evidence, especially like now when the world just seems to be heading towards even more meaningless chaos. But Jesus also tells his disciples not to be alarmed. Despite his terrifying description of the violence and confusion to come, he advises them to stay calm and trust that God has things under control, because in amongst it all is the good news of the kingdom.

Perhaps you are feeling that it has been a good adventure up to this point, perhaps you are in a place where you would like to see what the future holds, in the hope that things will get better. Or perhaps you are the kind of person who doesn't worry too much about what the future brings, even to the point where you tend not make many plans at all. We are all very different when it comes to thinking about the future and planning, yet some of us need to learn to go with God's flow and some of us need to learn to make sure we are ready. But in this time of waiting, all of us can trust that Christ, for whose birth we prepare at Christmas, will one day come again to reign in glory and the bleakness of the chaotic world as we see now, will pale into insignificance.