

Thoughts on life and faith: Ready for Christmas?

I imagine most of us can remember the Giles cartoons that appeared in the Daily Express newspaper. I remember hoping that I would get the Giles cartoon annual as a Christmas present, and I suppose this was because he had an amusing way of depicting family life in his drawings and captions. There was a particular offering in December one year, that showed the family doing their Christmas shopping in London's Oxford Street and one of the youngsters was repeatedly singing "Little Donkey", much to the annoyance of the Mother. And Mother said, "If someone doesn't stop singing "Little Donkey", someone is going to get a little thick ear!"

I don't think the Giles family was ready for Christmas.

In my childhood, Father was keen to instil certain values in my brother and I including punctuality. Regarding punctuality, my father, an ex Battery Sgt. Major in the Royal Artillery, said very simply, "The right time to be on parade is 5 minutes before you're due.

We're in the period of Advent, which, as we know, is the period of 4 weeks running up to Christmas, when traditionally Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus. But there's a deliberately two-edged feel to Advent. We prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming, his birth at Bethlehem. But we also remind ourselves that Jesus will come again, and the other focus for Advent is preparing ourselves for that great event. And the question that arises for us is: "Are we ready for the day when Jesus will come back"?

Now it may be that some of us struggle to believe that Jesus will come back. Or perhaps it's even a new idea to us – we're used to talking about Christmas when Jesus was born as a baby, but we're not used to the idea that he will come again and---- we will get to meet Him.

So before we can ask whether we're ready for the day when Jesus will return, we have to make sure we're all clear that He will.

In Matthew' gospel Jesus told a number of parables which speak of that day. The point of those parables is that Jesus' return will be a moment of separation. So lets consider Matthew chapter 13, verses 24 to 30 Jesus gives us a parable saying, "The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in a field, but while he was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.

He later explained that parable by saying that the day of harvest in the story, is the day that He, the Son of Man comes back. And the story pictures people as like plants in a farmer's field. While the young plants may sometimes be hard to distinguish, at the end of the day, there are only two types of plant: Weeds and Wheat. And the day of the harvest is when weeds go on the bonfire, and the wheat goes into the barn. Jesus consistently taught that he would return. And that His return will be a day when he judges each one of us, and a day of separation, a day of very different destinies, a day for heaven or hell. As we can see, we need to be ready.

If you ask me to get ready for any big event, the first thing I will ask is: “How long have I got to prepare? In Matthew 24 verse 36 tells us, “But concerning that day and hour no-one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only”. Even Jesus did not know the date he would come back. Which makes being ready for Jesus' return really tricky. We can't do it by knowing the date and then making sure we're prepared for that date. Not like cleaning the house before guests arrive. Not like Christmas. Of course we know when Christmas comes, don't we? It's December 25th. It's been December 25th ever since I was a small child. We know how many days we've got left before the last posting date; we know how long we've got to buy and wrap the presents. Even so, some of us get caught out.

But imagine if the system was different, and we didn't know when Christmas would be. So there's one day picked at random every year, when it will be Christmas day for that year. The actual day was a carefully guarded secret. The first we find out is when we get up in the morning, and all the news channels announce that today is Christmas Day. So we cancel our plans, we don't go to work, and we spend the day celebrating Jesus' birth in church, eating lunch with our family or some friends, and then giving presents to those closest to us. The return of Jesus is like no other event.

When you plan a wedding, you know how long you've got, and you steadily tick off the items on your “to do list” during the months beforehand. Even the fire drills at my old school were not exactly unexpected.

But one day, Jesus will come back, and we'll have absolutely no prior warning. We'll be in the middle of our normal days duties, just as if it were any other day. Someone will have put the kettle on to boil but not yet made the tea. And others will be on the 'phone to their grandma.

We don't know when Jesus will come back. Which makes it very hard indeed to be ready.

The the rest of this chapter (Matthew 24) and the whole of his next chapter builds a picture of what being ready looks like.

But from earlier in Matthew we already know what the headline is. Being ready is all about knowing the risen Jesus. Knowing him in such a way that our lives reflect that relationship. Knowing him, and living as he would have us live. So the question we're being asked is simple:” Are we ready for the day when Jesus will return?”

That's harder than it might be, because we don't know when that will be. But one day Jesus will come back, and it will happen when we least expect it. And so the day to be ready is today.

Geoff White
Locally Authorised Preacher