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ADVENT  
*for*  
EVERYONE

A JOURNEY  
THROUGH MATTHEW

TOM  
WRIGHT

SPCK

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## FOREWORD



If you do nothing else in your preparation for Christmas, read this book!

Advent is traditionally a time in the church's year of preparation, reflection and repentance as we look forward to Jesus' birthday at Christmas. Yet too often, we are swept along in the busyness of this season and miss the opportunities that Advent offers us to get ready for the coming of our saviour.

Tom Wright helps us to address this in this highly readable yet deeply thoughtful Advent book based on Matthew's gospel. Using four main themes focused on time – a time to watch, a time to repent, a time to heal and a time to love – to guide us through the four weeks of Advent, he provides a daily reflection as well as lively biblical exegesis and points for reflection and discussion.

*Advent for Everyone: A Journey through Matthew* gives us a wealth of fresh insights into Matthew's gospel. Tom Wright helps us to understand Advent within the wider context of God's love for us. This love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ who reconciles us to God through the cross, bringing us healing and restoration.

Tom Wright wears his considerable learning and biblical scholarship lightly. By providing relevant and highly thought-provoking images, he shows how we may study

## FOREWORD

and pray through this gospel both in relation to Jesus' ministry and within the context of our own lives and the world today.

This is a highly accessible and imaginative Advent book that will be a great resource to individuals and parish groups, helping us to get ready and welcome our Lord and saviour when he comes. I am delighted to commend it to you as my Advent Book for 2016.

*John Sentamu*  
*Archbishop of York*

## INTRODUCTION



As Christmas has become more exhausting and commercialized, many people find that keeping the preparatory season of Advent helps them to stay focused and recover something of the mystery and excitement that Christmas itself ought to have. Many churches now hold special Advent services. As we approach the darkest time of the year (in the northern hemisphere at least), Advent offers a gleam of light. And hope.

But Advent itself can be puzzling. ‘Advent’ means ‘coming’ or ‘arrival’. The hymns and readings often used at this season seem to be about two quite different things: about waiting for the ‘first coming’, the birth of Jesus, and about waiting for his ‘second coming’ to put all things right in the end. How did these things get muddled up? How can we make wise, prayerful sense out of it all?

The early Christians developed the ‘church’s year’ as a way of telling, learning and reliving the story of Jesus, which stands at the heart of our faith. As they did so, they came to understand that it wasn’t simply a matter of going round and round the same sequence and never getting anywhere. Think of a bicycle wheel; it goes round and round, but it is moving forwards, not standing still. The same circuit around the hub of the wheel becomes part of the forward movement of the bicycle as a whole. So it is

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with the church's year. We go round the circuit: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost. The traditional Western churches sum all this up on Trinity Sunday, as we learn more deeply who our glorious God really is. But the point of it all is that, in doing this, we are not simply going round and round the same topics and never getting anywhere. We are signing on as part of God's larger project, God's forward purposes, his plans for the whole creation to be renewed, so that (as the prophets said) the earth will be full of the knowledge and glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. In Jesus, God brought heaven and earth together; in his second coming, that joining together will be complete. That is the Advent hope.

So the church's year overlaps with itself. In Advent, we think our way back to the ancient people of God, to the call of Abraham and his family as the start of God's rescue operation for a world in ruins and a human race in chaos. We follow the story of Israel's hope, a hope that refused to die no matter what terrible things happened; a hope that the first Christians believed had become human in the baby Jesus. With that 'first Advent', it was clear that God's rescue operation for humans and the world had been decisively begun but not yet completed. Jesus really did launch God's kingdom 'on earth as in heaven' in his public career, his death and his resurrection. But it was clear, because of the sort of thing this kingdom was, that it would then need to make its way through the humble, self-giving service of Jesus' followers, until the time when Jesus would return to finish the work, to put all things right, to banish evil and death for ever, and bring heaven and earth completely together. The 'second Advent', then,

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overlaps with the first. We celebrate Jesus' first coming, and use that sense of fulfilment to fuel our hope for his second coming and to strengthen us to work for signs of that kingdom in our own day. We live between the first Advent and the second. That is one way of saying what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

All four gospels tell the story of how Jesus launched his kingdom. All four look ahead, in different ways, to the time when this work will be complete. Matthew's gospel seems at times to go into this in more detail. Certainly there is more, particularly in the chapters that conclude Jesus' public ministry, to ponder on this subject. And it is Matthew who describes Jesus' final commission to his disciples, assuring them that he is already ruling on earth and in heaven *and* that he is 'with them always, to the close of the age' in the work they have to do ahead of his second coming. The readings in the present book have been chosen to help you ponder and pray through what all this means: what it meant at the time (we always have to go back to that to check our bearings) and what it means today and tomorrow (we always have to come forwards to that to stay on track). My hope and prayer is that this book will help individuals, groups and churches to be 'Advent people': people of light in a dark world, people of hope in times and places of despair. People who follow Jesus.



## WEEK 1: A TIME TO WATCH

### FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

#### The Unexpected Visit: Matthew 24.36–44

<sup>36</sup>‘Nobody knows what day or time this will happen,’ Jesus went on. ‘The angels in heaven don’t know it, and nor does the son; only the father knows. <sup>37</sup>You see, the royal appearing of the son of man will be like the days of Noah.

<sup>38</sup>‘What does that mean? Well, in those days, before the flood, they were eating and drinking, they were getting married and giving children in marriage, right up to the day when Noah went into the ark. <sup>39</sup>They didn’t know about it until the flood came and swept them all away. That’s what it’ll be like at the royal appearing of the son of man.

<sup>40</sup>‘On that day there will be two people working in the field. One will be taken, the other will be left. <sup>41</sup>There will be two women grinding corn in the mill. One will be taken, the other will be left.

<sup>42</sup>‘So keep alert! You don’t know what day your master will come. <sup>43</sup>But bear this in mind: if the householder had known what time of night the burglar was going to come, he would have stayed awake and wouldn’t have let his house get broken into. <sup>44</sup>So you too must be ready! The son of man is coming at a time you don’t expect.’

It was a fine Saturday afternoon in the heat of summer. The family, some on holiday from work, were relaxing in the house and the garden. Books and magazines were lying around the place, along with coffee mugs, newspapers and packets of biscuits. Everything had the look of the sort of cheerful untidiness that a large family can create in about an hour.

Suddenly there was a ring at the doorbell. Wondering vaguely which friend might be calling I went to answer it, dressed as I was in very casual clothes. There outside, to my horror, was a party of 30 or so well-dressed visitors. They had arranged, many months before, to come to look at the house, because of its historic associations. And neither I nor the family had remembered a thing about it.

You can imagine the next five minutes. I suggested that the visitors went into the garden for a little while ('to get a good look at the house from the outside'), and then mobilized the family to clear everything up. Within minutes everything was clean and tidy. The children retreated into bedrooms. We opened the front door again and the visit went ahead.

You can tidy a house in a few minutes, if you put your mind to it. But you can't reverse the direction of a whole life, a whole culture. By the time the ring on the doorbell happens it's too late. That's what this passage in Matthew 24 is about.

It has been applied to two different kinds of event, neither of which was what Jesus himself had in mind (though some think Matthew was already looking further ahead). We had better look at them first.

On the one hand, a great many readers have seen here a warning to Christians to be ready for the second coming of Jesus. This goes, obviously, with an interpretation of the earlier part of the chapter which sees the 'coming' of the son of man not as his vindication, his exaltation to heaven, but as his return to earth. We have been promised, in Acts 1, 1 Thessalonians 4 and many, many other passages, that one day, when God remakes the entire world, Jesus himself

will take centre stage. He will ‘appear’ again, as Paul and John put it (e.g. Colossians 3.4; 1 John 3.2). Since nobody knows when that will be, it is vital that all Christians should be ready all the time.

On the other hand, many other readers have seen here a warning to Christians to be ready for their own death. Whatever precisely one thinks will happen immediately after death – and that’s a subject devout Christians have often disagreed about – it’s clearly important that we should, in principle, be ready for that great step into the unknown, whenever it is asked of us. That’s one of many reasons why keeping short accounts with God, through regular worship, prayer, reading of scripture, self-examination and Christian obedience, matters as much as it does.

You can read the passage in either of these ways, or both. Often the voice of God can be heard in scripture even in ways the original writers hadn’t imagined – though you need to retain, as the control, a clear sense of what they *did* mean, in case you make scripture ‘prove’ all kinds of things which it certainly doesn’t. It is vital, therefore, to read the passage as it would have been heard by Matthew’s first audience. A great national crisis was going to sweep over Jerusalem and its surrounding countryside at a date that was, to them, in the unknown future – though we now know it happened in AD 70, at the climax of the war between Rome and Judaea. Something was going to happen which would devastate lives, families, whole communities: something that was a terrible, frightening event and at the same time an event that was to be seen as ‘the coming of the son of man’, or the *parousia*, the ‘royal appearing’ of Jesus himself. And the whole passage indicates what this will be. It will be the swift and sudden

sequence of events that will end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The point this passage makes comes in three stages:

First, nobody knows exactly when this will be, only that it will be within a generation (verse 36).

Second, life will go on as normal right up to the last minute. That's the point of the parallel with the time of Noah. Until the flood came to sweep everything away, ordinary life was carrying on with nothing unusual.

Third, it will divide families and work colleagues down the middle: 'One will be taken and one left.' This doesn't mean (as some have suggested) that one person will be 'taken' away by God in some kind of supernatural salvation, while the other is 'left' to face destruction. If anything, it's the opposite: when invading forces sweep through a town or village, they will 'take' some off to their deaths and 'leave' others untouched.

The result – and this is the point Jesus is most anxious to get across to his disciples, who by this stage must have been quite puzzled as to where it was all going – is that his followers must stay awake. They must be alert and keep watch – like people who know that surprise visitors are coming sooner or later but who don't know exactly when.

The warning was primarily directed to the situation of dire emergency in the first century, after Jesus' death and resurrection and before his words about the Temple came true. But they ring through subsequent centuries, and into our own day. We too live in turbulent and dangerous times. Who knows what will happen next week, next year? It's up to each church, and each individual Christian, to answer the question: are you ready? Are you awake? Are you keeping watch?

For Reflection or Discussion

How do you interpret this passage? How do you stand ready, as it exhorts?

WEEK 1: MONDAY

The Parable of the Weeds: Matthew 13.24–35

<sup>24</sup>He put another parable to them.

‘The kingdom of heaven,’ he said, ‘is like this! Once upon a time a man sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup>While the workers were asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds in among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup>When the crop came up and produced corn, then the weeds appeared as well.

<sup>27</sup>‘So the farmer’s servants came to him.

“Master,” they said, “didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?”

<sup>28</sup>“This is the work of an enemy,” he replied.

“So,” the servants said to him, “do you want us to go and pull them up?”

<sup>29</sup>“No,” he replied. “If you do that you’ll probably pull up the wheat as well, while you’re collecting the weeds. <sup>30</sup>Let them both grow together until the harvest. Then, when it’s time for harvest, I will give the reapers this instruction: ‘First gather the weeds and tie them up in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

<sup>31</sup>He put another parable to them.

‘The kingdom of heaven,’ he said, ‘is like a grain of mustard seed, which someone took and sowed in his field. <sup>32</sup>It’s the smallest of all the seeds, but when it grows it turns into the biggest of the shrubs. It becomes a tree, and the birds in the sky can then come and nest in its branches.’

<sup>33</sup>He told them another parable.

‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven,’ he said, ‘which a woman took and hid inside three measures of flour, until the whole thing was leavened.’

<sup>34</sup>Jesus said all these things to the crowds in parables. He didn’t speak to them without a parable. <sup>35</sup>This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet:

I will open my mouth in parables,  
I will tell the things that were hidden  
Since the very foundation of the world.

‘Why doesn’t God *do* something?’

That is perhaps the most frequent question that people ask Christian leaders and teachers – and those of some other faiths, too. Tragedies happen. Horrific accidents devastate lives and families. Tyrants and bullies force their own plans on people and crush opposition, and they seem to get away with it. And sensitive souls ask, again and again: why is God apparently silent? Why doesn’t he step in and stop it?

These parables are not a direct answer to the question, and probably no direct answer can be given in this life. But they show, through the various different stories, that God’s sovereign rule over the world isn’t quite such a straightforward thing as people sometimes imagine.

Would people really like it if God were to rule the world directly and immediately, so that our every thought and action were weighed, and instantly judged and if necessary punished, in the scales of his absolute holiness? If the price of God stepping in and stopping a campaign of genocide were that he would also have to rebuke and restrain every other evil impulse, including those we all still know and cherish within ourselves, would we be prepared to pay that

price? If we ask God to act on special occasions, do we really suppose that he could do that simply when we want him to, and then back off again for the rest of the time?

These parables are all about waiting and watching; and waiting and watching are what we all find difficult. The farmer waits for the harvest-time, watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside the wheat. Not only the farmer, but also the birds wait for the tiny mustard seed to grow into a large shrub. The woman baking bread must wait for the leaven to spread its way through the dough until the whole loaf is mysteriously leavened. And that's what God's kingdom is like.

Jesus' followers, of course, didn't want to wait. If the kingdom was really present where Jesus was, coming to birth in what he was doing, then they wanted the whole thing at once. They weren't interested in God's timetable. They had one of their own, and expected God to conform to it.

Notice, in particular, what the servants say about the weeds. They want to go straight away into the cornfield and root out the weeds. The farmer restrains them, because life is never that simple. In their zeal to rid the field of weeds they are very likely to pull up some wheat as well.

Did Jesus, perhaps, have an eye here on the revolutionary groups of his day, only too ready to step into God's field and pull up what looked like weeds? There were many groups, including some of the Pharisees, who were eager to fight against pagans on the one hand and against compromised Jews on the other. These 'servants' may have intended to do God's will. They were longing for God to act, and were prepared to help him by acting themselves. But part of Jesus' whole campaign is to say that the true

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