

# The waiting servant

Mark 13:33-37

Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

Luke 12:35-38

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit, be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

I want to make this a bit interactive. Having a think about these verses, what do you think it means to be ready, to be on watch? It shows the character of God that He puts his servants in charge

Firstly, what kind of master would put his slaves in charge? It shows the character of God that He chooses people like us to 'be in charge', to do His work here. Elsewhere Jesus makes it clear that we are not slaves at all, but his friends (John 15:15-18). The fact that Jesus chose a bunch of 12 very ordinary people to be his closest followers, especially someone like Peter who denied Him 3 times in the hour of His greatest need, shows that Jesus is a pretty good judge of character, despite what some might think when they see what sort of people He chose. He knew what was coming for them, He would stand with them, and He knew that they would stand true and persevere to the end.

We've probably all read the gospels at least a few times in our life, and seen that Jesus' disciples were constantly bickering over who would be the greatest. When an argument started between the disciples about who would be the greatest, how did Jesus respond? He sat a little child beside Him and said that he who is least among you all – he is the greatest. John's mother even got in on the picture and tried to influence Jesus to give her son one of the best positions in the kingdom. Jesus must have shaken His head – that is not what He was about. His kingdom was not of this world. But would we have been any different? Such people like this bickering mob are the ones that the Creator of the universe chooses to be His representatives. It's a bit different from the way we choose people isn't it. You couldn't imagine the top recruiting companies out there trusting Jesus to hire suitable people for their organisations. Jesus chooses us – we don't choose Him – are we ready when He calls us?

A very interesting point about the Luke passage that we had read to us before is that Jesus specifically reminds them that they did not choose Him - He chose them. Athol Gill, who some of you may have heard of (he was a Baptist minister who worked with the poor and lectured at Whitley College until he passed away in 1992), in his book 'Life on the Road', points out that this is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of Jesus. (*Read 'Life on the Road, bottom of p. 29 to end of second last paragraph before next heading – don't mention Elijah & Elisha*). The question to ask ourselves is, will we be ready when Jesus calls us? Indeed, are we ready when He calls us every day? As we know from the Gospel stories, some who Jesus called were ready and some were not. With some people that Jesus called, we're told that they "immediately left their nets and followed Him". Another said, "first let me go and bury my father, or say goodbye to my family". It was to this man that Jesus said "no one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God". Harsh words but this is what it is to follow the Son of God. And look at the sort of people He chose – a despised tax collector, and fishermen among others – a motley bunch of 'unschooled ordinary men' as Luke later describes in the book of Acts. Unschooled ordinary men who would turn the Roman Empire upside down to such an extent that by the time the Emperor Constantine came to power about 300 years later, he made Christianity the state religion, not, as is widely held, so much as a result of his own conversion but more as a response to the dramatic increase in the growth of the faith. Rodney Stark who has written a quite influential book on the rise of Christianity, says reliable estimates indicate that just over half the population at the time of Constantine were Christians.

The power of the Holy Spirit working in these believers changed the world. As Margaret Mead has famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has". These early Christians living out their faith were ready – ready to lay down their lives if need be, and ready to follow Jesus wherever He may lead them; and look at the impact they had on the world. Need for watchfulness above all else – not when He might come back.

So what does it mean to be ready?

From the passages we had read to us this morning, the emphasis is on the need for watchfulness above all else. Jesus is basically saying don't worry, as many do, about when He will come back; just make sure you're ready when He does.

When I first became a Christian back in my teens, I used to think a lot about the 'last days', and for a time there I was convinced that I actually wouldn't die because, such was the state of the world, that Jesus was going to come back in my lifetime. I was told that we were living in the last days, and that we could tell this by the things that were happening presently in the world. Never mind the fact that Christians for 2000 years have been saying the same thing!

Its interesting that, when the new millennium came around a few years ago, many Christian groups took themselves off to Israel, convinced that this was it – Jesus was returning! They would have been pretty shocked to learn that when the first millennium came around 1000 years before; many Christians did exactly the same thing!

“Halley's comet blazed through the sky in the summer of 989; in 992 the date of the Annunciation coincided with Good Friday; as 1000 approached, waves of the frenzy known as St. Anthony's Fire brought on by ergot poisoning (from spoiled grain) brought on mass hallucinations that seemed to fulfil the prophecy of Revelation 9:5. The beginnings of the Peace of God movement to disarm the knights who were the source of so much disorder and misery was started in this era, arising out of a combination of apocalyptic fear and hope brought on by warnings followed by penance and miracles” ([http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw\\_center/millennium.htm](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/millennium.htm))

As was pointed out to me some years later, the last days really began when Jesus left to go back to the Father. Don't get all fixated about when Jesus might return. Just make sure you're ready when He does.

Being ready means being a faithful servant. Surrender, relationship as compared to seeking to feel good.

If we look at the passages again, it becomes clear that the implication from these passages, and backed up by the rest of the Gospels really, is that being ready means being a faithful servant.

It is simply about following Jesus ('simply' is an interesting word because following Jesus is at once the most simple and the most difficult thing in the world). Michael Leunig, that genius of a cartoonist, has a cartoon that Nell and I used on our wedding order of service that says 'Love one another and you will be happy. It is as simple and as difficult as that. There is no other way'. So when I say that it is simply about following Jesus, that is what I mean.

It is about being faithful in all things, it is about surrender, surrender of our lives to Him, and all of our lives, not just the parts that we find easy to give over – that's the difficult part.

It's about being Jesus, it's about relationship – with Jesus and with each other.

A member of our small group said quite profoundly a few weeks ago 'who are we apart from our relationships?'. When Jesus does come again, the question that He will ask each of us is 'how did you love?'.

There is an old chorus that I don't hear sung all that much these days. It says "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Break me, mould me, melt me, fill me". Think about the words. How does a song like that fit in our world of getting for yourself, our world where it's all about feeling good, where we for years we have had ads like the Toyota ad that exclaims 'oh, what a feeling' when we're fortunate enough to have one of their cars.

The constant temptation to follow the way of the world by seeking things which make us feel good are the same things that prevent us from being ready. The focus on feeling good has been to the great detriment of our society. Our own John Smith, in one of his Monday night Bible studies back a few months ago, quoted from a man called Martin Seligman, an American psychologist who has lamented the focus on feeling good in Western culture. Seligman has done research showing that the incidence of depression in Western societies has increased ten-fold since the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

One Christian counselor who I have enormous respect for, a guy called Lawrence Crabb, or Larry Crabb tells an interesting story of a client who came in to see him. Crabb said 'how can I help you?'. The guy said 'I just want to feel better'. Crabb then said 'well I suggest you take a trip to the Bahamas, grab some immoral women and plenty of booze and live it up for a while'. The guy looked at him bewildered, and sheepishly said 'I thought you were a Christian'.

The point Crabb was making is that feeling better is not what life is about. We're bombarded every day with advice on how to feel better – just buy this and everything will be alright, if you only looked like this you'd be in.

Jesus was offered that temptation - the temptation of the easy way out - quite a few times, particularly in his 40 days in the wilderness. The devil offered him everything but he held firm. Even in the garden when he was facing a task not faced by anyone else in history – when he asked God if there was any way at all that he wouldn't have to go through this, please show me, but he still had the enormous courage to ask for God's will – even in the face of such pain and incomprehensible anguish. Jesus was ready.

Jesus, by His life and teaching, clearly shows us that life is not about feeling good, contrary to what we hear from many pulpits these days.

Martin Luther King, who has always been one of my great heroes, and is one of the first people I want to meet when I get to heaven, said "I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may".

Being ready, is to also stand up and swim against the tide of popular opinion, to often stand as a lone voice in the wilderness, even at times when the church is going against you.

Years ago I used to have some records of Keith Green. Keith was a Christian singer and a prophet who boldly spoke out about the lack of compassion in many churches, and would also lament his own sinfulness.

One of his albums is called 'No Compromise' and the cover of the album has this painting showing a great ruler passing by in a parade and fiercely ordering the crowds to bow down on their knees and worship. From behind you see one figure standing up straight, refusing to bow down, simply looking back at the ruler. Jesus was a man of no compromise. We are called to be the same. Being ready despite your circumstances.

You know, if I can indulge in a bit of a personal story, I will say that the last few weeks at work have not been enjoyable for me. Some situations have been very difficult to deal with.

But I've been having times, not many I admit, where I can thank God for this time of testing. It is times like these where I am forced into the arms of God, to remind myself that God is there despite how low I have been feeling.

Because if I just go by how I feel, then in the last few weeks I would be convinced that God was nowhere to be found. But that's what faith is – the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

God is with us when we make ourselves ready, despite what we may be going through.

Any suffering that I have gone through in the last few weeks though has been minimal when compared to millions around the world.

But if you want to know about suffering, and what it means to be Christlike in the midst of it, then go to your Bibles and read the suffering passages, read about Job, read about Paul, read about Jesus, read the passages in Isaiah about the suffering servant.

I remember when I was 16 and flying to Germany with my mum to see some of our family. On the plane I was reading the book of Acts and reading about Paul being beaten and shipwrecked, and I remember thinking 'gee this guy went through so much'.

At the time I was also reading a book by a guy called Haralan Popov, a Christian pastor who was imprisoned in Bulgaria for his faith. The book is called 'Tortured for his faith'. You may know of it. I recommend it if you haven't read it. It describes the unbelievable persecution that Popov went through, simply because he was a Christian in a land where Communism did not tolerate religious faith. He was taken by the authorities in the middle of the night from his home, with his wife and young child watching on in tears. Then for the next 2 weeks he was forced to stand in front of a wall, just centimetres away from it, while he was interrogated on charges of being a spy. If he even so much as blinked, they would beat him. That was just one of the barbaric things he had to endure throughout 13 years of torture and persecution. But he came out of that a spiritual giant. It was only his faith that sustained him through those years, and through it he led other prisoners to faith. Popov knew what it was to be ready, to be a suffering servant no matter what his circumstances. His faith was genuine and I can guarantee that when he passed on some years ago, I can just

imagine Jesus waiting for him at the heavenly gates, saying “well done, good and faithful servant”.

Being ready is about remaining true no matter what life deals you. It's the times in my life that have been the most difficult that have been the times of the deepest growth. I get concerned when things are going very well for me because it's at those times that I find it so easy to become complacent and don't see my need of God.

I remember again when I was about 16 and Mum and Dad were fighting every day, reading the passages in my Bible about suffering.

I wasn't specifically looking for those passages. They just stuck out to me as they reflected what I was going through in my life at that time, and gave me such comfort in the midst of my circumstances.

As well as reading about Paul's struggles with beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonment and so on, I also read Peter's first letter which talked about suffering for doing right, that we have to expect suffering if we are to be Christian.

I also read in Revelation that there will be a time when there will no more tears. These all provided great encouragement and comfort to me.

It was a very depressing time, lying awake at night and listening to Mum and Dad arguing with each other. At the same time though I had a distinct sense of joy about me. It wasn't a happiness which is based on circumstances, it was a joy that can only be an inner thing.

I was learning, like Paul, to be content no matter what the circumstances. My faith sustained me in those times. I still stubbornly believe that that sense of contentment that Paul spoke of is available to every believer, despite the fact that we can explain it away by saying Paul had had the most dramatic conversion experience of actually seeing Jesus, and that had sustained him through anything. Jesus is with us when we are ready. What does a ready person look like?

People who are ready, in this sense of the word, are people who draw others to Christ.

People who are ready are people who know what it is to love – they make Jesus more attractive to us.

Larry Crabb, who I mentioned before, in one of his books says “Often those who seem to have the trappings of maturity don't seem to draw us to the Lord. [But] truly mature people are seductive: they entice us to pursue a God whom they know better than we”.

Such people are truly loving. Further on, Crabb goes on to say “something is different about people who love. They convey a *presence* that goes beyond the words they say, the things they do. We know they are for us. In their presence, our growth seems more *appealing* to us than *required* of us”.

Ready people are those who *draw* us to Christ – who make Jesus more attractive to us.

The things that draw me to Jesus are the things that are not who I am naturally. E.g. it's the things about Jesus being assertive and authoritative which attract me, because, naturally, that's not me. The story of Jesus going through the temple, confronting the Pharisees, make Jesus more attractive as I had grown up quite a timid person, and this side of Jesus was authoritative and showed Him acting on the courage of conviction. Being ready means being a servant

At Small Group in the Passover week this year we washed each others' feet. It was a very solemn occasion.

I found that having my feet washed made more of an impact on me than washing someone's feet, because as the person was washing my feet, I pictured that it was Jesus.

Can you imagine the Son of God sitting down there at your feet washing them? This was an action that only lowly servants performed. What was God himself doing washing my feet?

I wonder how many of us would have the same reaction as Peter, telling Jesus indignantly that he was not going to wash *my* feet! Being ready is being ready to be a servant, at times to those you would least expect to be a servant to.

I want to finish with the words of a song by Ross Langmead. Ross is a Baptist Minister and lecturer at Whitley College. Many years ago he wrote a song simply called 'Be Ready'. I'm not going to sing it for you so you don't have to worry!

But it's a song that talks about being ready and how we can boldly trust that Jesus walks with us in our readiness.

Be ready, Jesus is near, where will you find Jesus today?

Be ready, Jesus is near, the power of love has only begun

Angels appear to the shepherds' surprise

The news is announced and they're gone

It's mystery as well for the men from the east

In the star which brightly shone

Jesus brings love and good news to the poor

He calls us to walk in His way

Oh why should this happen to people like us?

It's the dawn of a brand new day

Be ready.....

Open your eyes, keep your ears to the ground

The rainbow is there in the rain

I can see God in the things that you do

And in those who cry out in pain

Where there is peace, where a nation is just

Where those who are poor can live too

In places like these is the face of our Lord

Leave the old and explore the new

Be ready....

Sometimes I hear silent wings from above

I know that I'm not on my own

But one day the world will be dancing for joy

As the power of the Lord is known

Be ready.....