

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Matthew 24:36 NIV

On the first Sunday of Advent, which incidentally starts us off with a new gospel cycle(Matthew this year), we are brought face to face with the promise of Jesus’ second return as we look forward to his first time here in celebrating his birth.

We all can understand Jesus first time on earth, but his return, that’s another story. What we’re given is not a lot of specifics, but the promise as well as a lot of imagery which tends to baffle us sometimes rather than make things clearer.

Over the years good folk have tried to explain it, and just when their theories seem to have some credibility, something comes along to make their theories wrong. On the one hand, you can understand the need. Shouldn’t we make sure everyone knows, and warn them? But on the other hand, does it do Christians any good to be sure about the second coming, and neglect what they could be doing now for God and neighbor?

Perhaps that is why over and over again Jesus never tells when his return will be. We are to live our lives fully and completely with the caveat that the Lord could still come at any time!

One of Paul’s churches, that of Thessalonica, was obsessed with the time of the Lord’s return. Some were so preoccupied with it they stopped working, and attached themselves to households declaring that since the Lord was coming very soon, they didn’t have to work anymore; they only required sustenance for a time.

It was here that Paul flatly contradicted such living:

“ In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching¹ you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” II Thessalonians 3:6-10

Since that time, we have had those who have brought forth various time tables. Others have stopped everything when witnessing events like Hailey’s Comet, gathering on a hillside waiting for the inevitable end.

My favorite story goes back over 30 years, when, a person visited our church youth group, and afterward chatted with me . The conversation turned to the Lord’s return. He told me that his pastor said that because the Lord was coming, men should remain single and not marry. He said that was what he was going to do. I often wonder what became of that person. Did he still stay single? Did he marry? Did he lose his faith when it became obvious the Lord wasn’t going to return any time soon?

That’s the risk we run if we try to figure it out. Maybe its better we don’t know. We are God’s children, saved by God’s grace, surrounded with God’s love, guided by the Holy Spirit. What else do we need to live out our lives here?

The real way of approaching the Lord’s return is to concentrate on what Jesus says, “Be ready”, “keep awake”. Let us always be about God’s work on this earth, but with the knowledge that God may call us at any time.

Martin Luther put it this way “If the Lord were to come tomorrow, I would plant a tree today”.

We can confidently leave the rest to God.

Pr. John Van Haneghan