

Sunday 3rd December 2023, the first Sunday of Advent at 9.00 am and 10.30 am

RETURN OF CHRIST

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell Presbyterian Church

RETURN OF CHRIST



READINGS:

Isaiah 64:1-9

**Oh, that you would rend the heavens and
come down,
that the mountains would tremble before
you!**

**² As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your
enemies**

and cause the nations to quake before you!

**³ For when you did awesome things that we
did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains
trembled before you.**

**⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for
him.**

**⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do
right,
who remember your ways.**

But when we continued to sin against them,

you were angry.

How then can we be saved?

⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean,

and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;

we all shrivel up like a leaf,

and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

⁷ No one calls on your name

or strives to lay hold of you;

for you have hidden your face from us

and have given us over to our sins.

⁸ Yet you, Lord, are our Father.

We are the clay, you are the potter;

we are all the work of your hand.

⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;

do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look on us, we pray,

for we are all your people.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving

⁴ I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— ⁶ God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24-37

**²⁴ “But in those days, following that distress,
“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’**

²⁶ “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The Day and Hour Unknown

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge,

each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

SCRIPTURE VERSE

³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’ Mark 13:36-37

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to talk about the **Return of Christ**, and in particular to provide some interesting background information on the physical location of the **Mount of Olives** and on the **Temple Mount** where currently the Dome on the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque stand.

The Return of Christ is a most dramatic and comforting doctrine in the Christian church: celebrated in **creeds**, **confessions**, **songs** and **hymns** (Apostles Creed, Westminster Confession, How great Thou art).

The hymn *How great Thou art* says it all:

**When Christ shall come,
With shouts of acclamation,
And take me home,
What joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow
In humble adoration
And there proclaim,
"My God, how great Thou art!"**

Billy Graham said, Many times when I go to bed at night I think to myself that before I awaken Christ may come.

You may be interested to know the return of Jesus Christ and the end of the age occupies some 1,845 Scriptural verses apparently.

You know we are not just looking for something to happen, we are looking for Someone to come!

And when these things begin to come to pass, we are not to drop our heads in discouragement or shake our heads in despair, but rather lift up our heads in delight.

John Calvin, the great reformer said

We must hunger after Christ until the dawning of that great day when our Lord will fully manifest the glory of His kingdom.

JOHN CALVIN



Today's readings from the 1st Sunday in Advent (Year B) have a familiar ring about them. And as we all know familiarity can lead to complacency.

But I hope this morning to reawaken your interest ... and knowledge of the Return of Christ ... which is sometimes called the Parousia.

So, let's look firstly at the location where Christ is expected to return.

Mount of Olives



The Mount of olives is a ridge like feature east of Jerusalem and was the location of an olive grove hence Mount of Olives – a very interesting piece of real estate!

- Here David fled from Absalom (2 Samuel 15:30-32);
- here Solomon built high places for his wives false gods (1 Kings 11:7);
- here Ezekiel saw in his vision the departing glory of God leave the Temple (Ezekiel 11:23);
- here Zechariah predicts the Lord's feet shall alight on the apocalyptic day of the Lord (Zech 14: 1-5);
- near here Lazarus was raised at Bethany (John 11:1-46);
- here we think Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5);

- here Jesus gave his sermon on the signs of the last days (Mark 13:3, Matt 24);
- here in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was apprehended by the soldiers and betrayed by Judas (John 18, Matt 26:47-57, Mark 14:42-50);
- and here 40 days after his resurrection Jesus ascended into Heaven (Luke 24:50-53).
- here it is thought Jesus will return (Zechariah 14:1-5, Acts 1: 9-11).

Zechariah 14:1-5 The Lord Comes and Reigns

14 A Day of the Lord is coming, Jerusalem, when your possessions will be plundered and divided up within your very walls.

2 I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half

of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. 3 Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. 4 On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. 5 You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

Acts 1: 9-11

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men

dressed in white stood beside them. 11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”



- Tabernacle
- 1st Solomon
- Ezra (rebuilt)
- 2nd Herod (expanded)
- 3rd Apocalypse (not yet built)

Now there are several things to note:

- Tabernacle

The Tabernacle or "residence" or "dwelling place", according to the OT was the portable dwelling place for the presence of God from the time of the Exodus from Egypt through the conquering of the land of Canaan.

Built to specifications revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:8-9), it accompanied the Israelites on their wanderings in the wilderness and their conquest of the Promised Land.

The First Temple in Jerusalem superseded it as the dwelling-place of God.

- Solomon's Temple (957 – 586 BC)

So, the lack of a shrine for the worship of God in Jerusalem embarrassed David when he had consolidated his power and had built a permanent palace for himself.

He said, **“I dwell in a house of cedar but the ark of God dwells in a tent”** (2 Sam 7:2).

But God did not allow David to build the temple because he was stained by the blood of his enemies, but he bought the site, collected materials, gathered treasure, created the plans and commissioned his son Solomon to build it (1 Chron 22:8; 2 Sam 24).

And Solomon began construction in his 4th year as King, and the Temple was completed 7 years later (1Kings 6:37-38), in the mid 10th century BC.

In the year 587 BC Nebuchadnezzar looted and sacked the Temple (2 Kings 25: 8-10.)

- Rebuilt Temple of Ezra and Nehemiah

But Temple was rebuilt after the exile as recorded in the book of Ezra, and was completed in 515 BC.

So, 70 years after the exile, approximately, Jewish exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem to build an altar, in the rebuilt temple, and finally the walls of the city.

Although modest in comparison to the 1st Temple, Ezra's rebuilt Temple was later greatly enlarged and expanded by Herod the Great.

- 2nd Temple.

This latter temple commenced by Herod the Great in 19 BC was the Temple in which Jesus was dedicated, and where he taught and cast out the money changers on two occasions.

This Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

You may be interested to know Herod the Great was of Arab origin, a practicing Jew, and appointed as the Roman ruler in Judea.

Interestingly, in the year 40 BC ... the Parthians invaded Judea, civil war broke out, and Herod was forced to flee to Rome.

But the Roman Senate nominated him as king of Judaea and equipped him with an army to make good his claim.

So, in the year 37 BC, at the age of 36, Herod became the unchallenged ruler of Judaea, a position he was to maintain for 32 years.

Now the Herodian Temple was again the centre of Israelite life. It was not only the focus of religious ritual but also the repository of the Holy Scriptures and other national literature and the meeting place of the Sanhedrin ... the highest court of Jewish law ... during the Roman period.

Well, there was a rebellion against Rome ... and it soon focused on the Temple ...

and effectively ended with the Temple's destruction on 70 AD.

Now all that remained of the retaining wall surrounding the Temple Mount ...

was a portion of the Western Wall (also called the Wailing Wall) ...

which continues to be the focus of Jewish aspirations and pilgrimage.

Temple Mount was later captured by a Moslem army and changed to the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqṣā Mosque in 691 AD.

However, it was subsequently returned to Jewish control ... in 1967 ...

known as the 6 Day War.

Where between June 5 and June 10, in 1967
Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria – which
in a coordinated military action had attacked Israel
...

but Israel prevailed ...

and occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip,
the West Bank, East Jerusalem including Temple
Mount, and the Golan Heights.

- Ezekiel's Temple.

Now Scripture does mention a temple called
Ezekiel's Temple, but it is not yet built.

The text discussing this Temple is written in the
Book of Ezekiel chapter 40, where Ezekiel details
the temple architecture ... as well as the
permanent entrance of God ... through the
eastern gate of the temple wall.

But scholarly opinion ... is divided on whether this is a purely spiritual Temple ... or a rebuilt 3rd Temple.

3rd Temple - Apocalypse



But there is likely to be a 3rd Temple – the Temple in the apocalypse.

Now it is important to appreciate an important event in the life of the Temple ... is called the "Abomination of Desolation".

This term is quite difficult to understand but essentially, I believe it refers to the deseccration of the Temple by the introduction of idol worship:

- the 1st notable Abomination of Desolation was the re-dedication of the Temple to Zeus by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BC, and
- the 2nd was the worship of the Roman Standards on the Temple Mount under Titus in 70 AD. (see Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11)

These two events are important because they foreshadow the days of the Antichrist immediately prior to Christ's return (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4,9; Revelation 13:14-15).

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, 9

3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion

occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

Revelation 13:14-15

14 Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honour of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.

And there are several important things to note here:

- Jesus links his return with another Abomination of Desolation which appears to require a Temple: Mark 13:14, 26-27. But as we all know there is currently no Temple.
- Paul links Christ's return with another Abomination of Desolation: 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4,9
- Daniel links the end of human history with the Abomination of Desolation: Daniel 12:11ff.
- Zechariah links the apocalyptic end of human history with the coming Messiah on the Mount of Olives: Zechariah 14:3-5, 9, 12.

I wonder what you are thinking at the moment?

I wonder what the Jewish gentleman was thinking (slide) as he looks over the Kidron Valley from the Mount of Olives ...

towards Temple Mount ...

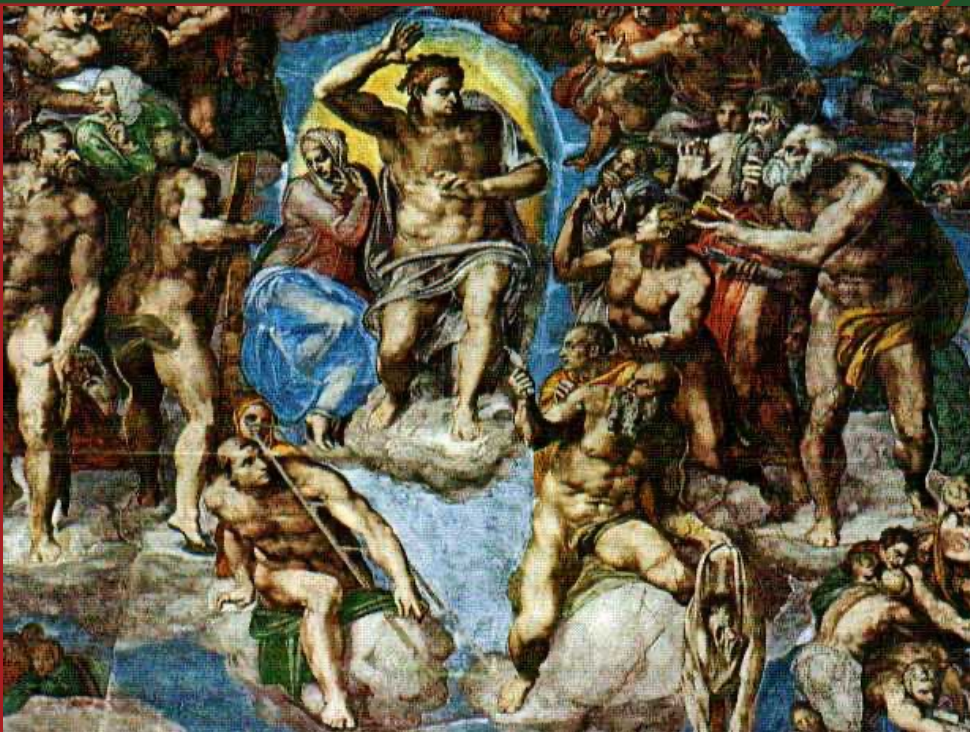
and sees the 3rd most holy Moslem site ...

the Dome of the Rock ...

completed in 691 AD ... and rebuilt 3 times due to earthquake and fire.

It was built ... not as a mosque for public worship ... but rather as a shrine for Moslem pilgrims ... on the site of the Jewish Holy of Holies, the Temple.

Disruption in World affairs



You see the biblical witness suggests human history will go through a time of huge disruption ... which some describe as the apocalypse.

Scripture, Creeds, Confessions, hymns, and songs tell of a sequence of events:

- There will be a final Abomination of Desolation
- The Abomination of Desolation appears to require the Temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt
- So why don't you now just Google on your smart phones "rebuilding Temple in Jerusalem": you will notice a plethora of detail on the plans and aspirations to rebuild the Temple
- Rebuilding the Temple will likely require the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque ...

which, in itself ... will be highly likely to precipitate a massive military ... and terrorist backlash ... perhaps even a world war ...

where the armies of the world surround
Jerusalem.

Now, I am not suggesting the Temple should be
rebuilt ... nor am I inciting religious animosity.

Quite the opposite: you know, I have spent a good
number of years of my life trying to bring about
peace to warring religious factions: in Bosnia,
Kosovo, and slightly differently in Northern
Ireland.

You see it may well be ... the Abomination of
Desolation may mean something different this
time ... than the desecration of a rebuilt Temple.

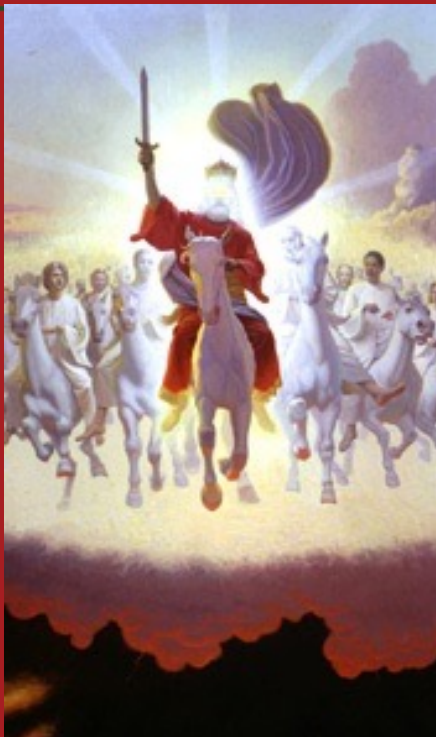
Scripture, our creeds, confessions, and hymns ...
may be fulfilled quite differently ... from what I am
suggesting.

However, I am simply outlining the extraordinary
times we live in ... and the complexity of religion

... politics ... and history ... in the light of what Scripture says.

And bang in the middle of this is the Christian conviction of the Return of Christ.

Returning King



- **Be Discerning**
- **Be at Peace**
- **Be Informed**
- **Be Careful**

So, the question we need to ask is ... how shall we react?

- Firstly, Be Discerning.

You know Jesus did not share the enthusiasm of the disciples for the magnificent architecture of Herod's new Temple.

Instead, he proceeded to prophesy that it would be destroyed.

The disciples responded by wanting to know when this would happen, and it seems they thought the destruction of the Temple was one of the events at the end of the age.

But Christ's greatest concern was that his followers should not be deceived because false Christ's and false teachers would come and attempt to deceive them.

So, friends, be discerning of those who teach in Christ's name.

- Secondly, Be at Peace.

Times of persecution are not happy times. And the only person who speaks nobly of enduring persecution is one who has never experienced it.

However, Jesus wants us to be at peace. In Mark 13:11 he tells us the Holy Spirit will be with us. He will comfort us in our discomfort. Be at peace and quietly continue to witness.

- Thirdly, Be Informed.

The emphasis in Luke 21:36 is on knowing what the scriptures teach, to watch and to pray.

Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Well, you might ask, how important it is for you to study and know the prophetic scriptures ... so you will not be in the dark and led astray?

I think there are two equal and opposite dangers with regards to the return of Jesus: one is disinterest and disbelief.

And the other, is an obsessive interest, distorting scripture to the latest theory or prophetic fad.

But there is a middle way and Jesus warns us not to be ignorant. So be informed.

- Fourthly, Be Careful.

The vital thing here, I believe, is not to indulge in speculation or to give way to despair.

Since the Return of Christ – the day of the Lord, the apocalypse – will mean ... spiritual disaster for many people ... and discomfort for most Christians ... Jesus encourages the disciples to pray for strength to remain faithful to the end.

And so here are a few illustrations on being alert
...

Firstly, Duke of Wellington: “Why do you stand in such an unbecoming position?” the Duke of Wellington once asked an officer caught slouching in uniform. “I’m off duty, sir,” the man replied.

Then the Duke bellowed, “A British officer is never off duty. Resume your military position.”

Be alert!

Secondly, have you heard of the term Argus-eyed: The term “argus-eyed” means being extraordinarily watchful. Thus, an argus-eyed committee may watch the counting of the money or the ballots. Argus, a monster in Greek mythology, had one hundred eyes, only two of which were said to sleep at once.

Be awake!

Thirdly, The German eagle: The German eagle had its head turned to our left hand, and the Roman eagle to our right hand. When Charlemagne was made “Kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire,” he joined the two heads together, one looking east and the other west.

Be aware ... stay up to date!

Fourthly, there was once a poor sighted professor: “So, you use three pairs of glasses, Professor?” “Yes, one pair for long-sight, one pair for short-sight, and the third to look for the other two.”

Be always looking!

So with regards to the Parousia the scriptural emphasis is on being alert being careful.

Remember Jesus said:

36 Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. Luke 21:36

So, friends be careful.

“I should so love to lay my crown at his feet”



Are we living in the last days?

It is a hotly debated subject.

I am equivocal. I really don't know.

But I will also tell you this ... my blood will run cold ... should the Temple be rebuilt through the destruction of the Dome of the Rock ... with the armies of the world gathering around Jerusalem.

Now I want to conclude by telling you about a conversation Queen Victoria had with her chaplain.

Dean Farrar was a privileged personal friend of Queen Victoria though he seldom referred to the distinction.

But on the anniversary of the accession of Edward VII to the throne during a service in Canterbury cathedral he told how the Queen, after hearing one of her chaplains preach in St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, on the return of Christ said

“Oh, how I wish that the Lord would come during my lifetime.”

“Why does your Majesty feel this very earnest desire?” asked her chaplain.

**With deep emotion the Queen replied
“Because I should so love to lay my crown at his feet.”**

Indeed, I too long to see the Lord ... and lay not a crown ... but my life at his feet.

AMEN