

WARY [MATTHEW 24:36-51]

Introduction – Pompeii’s Sudden & Unexpected Demise

You may have seen in the news a couple of days ago that two more victims have been discovered in an archaeological dig on the outskirts of the ancient Roman city of Pompeii. One was likely a man in his 30s or 40s and the other his young male slave between the ages of 18-25. Both men were discovered in what appears to be an underground corridor in which they were perhaps seeking refuge after the eruption of nearby Mount Vesuvius. Given that harnessed horses were found at the same premises in 2017, its thought that these men may have escaped the initial fall of ash, but were then killed by a subsequent volcanic blast.

And as with other victims that have been discovered, the compressed volcanic ash which descended upon the city after the blast has preserved stunning details of the victims and their final moments. Of these two latest victims, you can even see the fabric folds on their pleated tunics which were worn almost 2000 years ago.

And perhaps why Pompeii captures the imagination and attention of so many of us, is not only because it provides a window back in time to Roman culture, but because of the shocking reality that has been preserved. It’s hard to conceive that so suddenly and unexpectedly so many people from all walks of life could be lost in such a tragedy. And the confronting and detailed plaster casts of the victims press home just how real this tragedy was and its victims were. We perhaps imagine what it would have been like for us had we been in their shoes.

1. A Warning of What Is To Come (24:36-41)

This is a sobering note to begin the sermon, but as it was with Pompeii, so it was with the flood in the days of Noah. These were real people, men and women, adults and children, who suddenly and unexpectedly were swept up in unspeakable tragedy. And as it was with Pompeii and the flood, so Jesus says it will be when he returns. Let me read again from verse 37, **As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.** ³⁸ **For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark;** ³⁹ **and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.**

As the flood was unexpected in nature and universal in scope, so it will be with the return of Jesus. Tragedies the likes of the flood and of Pompeii are sobering pictures of what is to come.

And in response to the disciples who wanted to know the date of Jesus’ return (24:3) and in contradiction of those who would fraudulently claim they know the date of the end. We need to hear Jesus’ words in verse 36, **But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.** Jesus’ return will be sudden and unexpected.

In advent we thus not only remember the coming of the Lamb in Bethlehem, but anticipate his return as the Lion who will come to judge the earth and rule and reign. He will come to take all those who belong to him and judge those who remain in sinful rebellion against him. As Jesus says in verses 40-41, **Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.** ⁴¹ **Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.**

In response to this immense reality Jesus leaves us with two directives in the remainder of the passage – to keep watch, and to remain his faithful servants.

2. So Keep Watch (24:42-44)

For this first directive, let me read again from verse 42, **“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”**

Though recent reforms have slightly improved the situation in Australia, it’s generally understood that one of the tricks of casinos and establishments with pokies, is to cause punters to lose their bearings, to lose track of the outside world, and become so immersed with the gambling experience that they throw away more and more of their money. Common tactics employed by Casinos in the States include blacking out windows and not having any clocks in sight. Other tactics include pokie machines declaring ‘wins’ when the punter has actually lost – they might indeed have received back \$4, but neglect to realise they’d put in \$10 on that draw. Another is to offer a free buffet to give the impression of tremendous value, when in reality the punter may have in effect paid hundreds and thousands of dollars for that ‘free’ meal. Built on deception, the gambling industry is destroying thousands of families in Australia and as people who know and love God’s truth and care about the vulnerable and the suffering, is something that we should not endorse in any way.

Now just as punters get numbed to reality when on the pokies or in casinos, so do we face the same dynamic when it comes to eternity. We can get so immersed by the world around us that we forget that eternity is coming. Listen to what Jesus says earlier in verse 12, **Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.**

Pardon the pun, but these are chilling words. How tragic it is when the father sends his wife and children into crippling debt because he is mesmerised by the glowing screen of a pokie machine, how much more tragic is it when we distract, numb and occupy ourselves with hobbies, habits and addictions that cause us to lose our eternal bearings.

Jesus confronts us this morning and lifts up the blinds. He pulls the power on the pokie machines and he says, “Keep watch!” He doesn’t mean spending every waking moment doing nothing but simply waiting for him to return, but he calls us not to lose our eternal bearings. He calls us to be ever mindful of the moment we find ourselves in – everything here is temporary and eternity is coming.

What is it that might be numbing you from your eternal bearings? For me, as a young father, TV is one big thing. When I get to the end of the day and the kids are in bed and all my work is done, I’m so exhausted I don’t feel like engaging with anyone, I don’t feel like coming before God, I just want to turn on the TV. Now, unless the content of the TV show is God dishonouring, this isn’t an intrinsically bad thing. I think it’s possible to enjoy TV as a good gift from God. But when it becomes the habit that numbs us from eternal realities, that prevents us from engaging with God and distracts us from living for him, we need to stop watching and keep watch instead. I know if I’m not careful I could spend the next decade switching on the TV and switching off to God. I don’t want to reach 40 years of age and realise that I’d been numb, when I could have been white hot for God.

As a side note this is where suffering in our life can be a severe mercy, or a weighty gift from God. For God often uses these seasons in our lives to dull the numbing distractions and brighten our eternal bearings. In such times, we can praise God through the pain for this gift.

Whether suffering or not however, this is the blessing of Advent, that we might remind one another of our eternal bearings – Christ has come at Bethlehem and he will come again.

3. Remain His Faithful Servant (24:45-51)

Let's now turn to consider Jesus' final directive for us in this passage in light of his return. I'll read from verse 45 – **“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

Jesus is not pulling any punches here is he? Not only are we to keep watch, to keep our eternal bearings, but we are to discharge our duties as God's faithful servants. No employee would get off scot-free were they discovered to be drinking on the clock, or using the bosses dime to play around on the stock market, and in the same way, we belong to Jesus, we are on his time and are called to discharge our duties.

And what are these duties? Whilst this parable could be seen to be speaking generally about faithful and holy living, I think there is a specificity in the parable that drives towards a specificity in application. What is it that the servant is to do? Give food to those in the household at the proper time. You'll recall Jesus' words in Matthew 4:4, **Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.** Indeed as the Word made flesh, Jesus declares himself in John 6:35 to be the bread of life.

It is incumbent upon us as the people of God to continue to minister, share, speak the Word of God, the gospel of Christ, because through it we come to eternal life and keep our eternal bearings. This responsibility is for every Christian, but is particularly heightened for those in any leadership position – be they pastors, Bible study leaders, parents or other.

When it comes to pastors in God's church, we are to be those who speak and teach God's Word. Let us be a congregation who asks this of our leaders, who supports them in this task and who prays that we might remain faithful to God's Word. Don't expect us float on the rising tide of wickedness, don't desire us to toe the line of contemporary public opinion, don't look for sermons that square with what you deem palatable. Look for us to preach this word even when it challenges you and even when it might be unpopular. Without it, we starve.

Yet as I just mentioned, this passage is not just for pastors, but for all of us. We all have a responsibility to minister God's Word to one another. In particular we all have a responsibility to minister the gospel.

Do you know why the Bible says that God delays the return of his son? That more might hear the gospel and be reconciled to God. Let me share just two verses –

Matthew 24:14, **And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.**

2 Peter 3:9, **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** And then in verse 15, **Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation...**

There are more who need to hear and be reconciled, this is why Jesus has not returned yet. This is why he seems a long time coming. God calls us to be part of his global mission that many more from the world over might come to know the love of God in Christ. Are we distributing the bread of life to others?

In Italy today, there are millions of people who live within the vicinity of Vesuvius and on its lower slopes. Though the government has management systems and warning plans, there are many who fear that these are simply inadequate given how suddenly and unexpectedly Vesuvius can erupt. It would seem that many have forgotten that it erupted only recently in 1944.

As Christians who know God's truth we need to stop numbing ourselves from eternal realities and kidding ourselves into thinking that Vesuvius is never going to erupt. What a tragedy it would be to lose a colleague or a child because we prioritised having a good time with them than their eternal well-being. In light of Christ's return, we need to be those who hold out the gospel to a world around us in desperate need.

You see what we have come to know in Christ is good news. Though the inhabitants of Pompeii had no place of escape, though those two men tragically could not find sufficient shelter in that eternal corridor, Jesus has come to shield us from the wrath of God. He did so not begrudgingly, but in love. In love he came to rescue you, in love he came to rescue you me. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 tells us that it is Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath. John 3:16 tells us that **God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish, but have eternal life.** By placing our trust in Jesus, as the Son of God who took the punishment of our sins upon his shoulders, we can find shelter under him and so receive forgiveness, reconciliation with God, adoption into his family as his beloved children and receive eternal life.

If we have not received Christ, let us do so. If we have, let us hold this good news out to the world around us, and may our master find us doing so upon his return.