

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera, Qld

3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023 – First Sunday in Advent

**Mark 13:24-37**

**KEEP WATCH, BE CONFIDENT**

It's probably a scene we can all relate to one way or another, either as children or as parents, or we might even have experienced it from both sides. Mum and Dad are going out for a while, and before they go they give the kids some jobs to do, and tell them to make sure they are all done by the time they get back home. What will most often be the first question which pops in the kids' minds, and maybe even come out of their mouths? Any ideas? I think it would be 'how long will you be gone?', or, 'when will you be back?'. Why do they ask this? Firstly, so they know how much time they have just to laze around before they have to get their jobs done. And secondly, so they know how much time they have to raid the bickie jar or the liquor cabinet, depending on their age, and to cover things up so they don't get caught. Ever been in that situation, on either side? When I was growing up, the times we lived out in the country were great because we knew that if Mum went into town she was gone for an hour or two. But when we lived in town and she was just ducking down the shops we had to get in and do what we were told straight away because we didn't know how long she would be. We couldn't just wait, we also had to watch, and not even think about getting up to any other mischief. I admit that when my kids were still at home, I liked to keep them on their toes like that; if I was going to be out for an hour or more I would still tell them I'd be back soon. I knew from when I was young that not knowing when your parents will return helps to keep you on your toes.

With terror attacks an ever-present threat, and now added to this pandemics, plus also unrest or conflict overseas, we are often told to always be vigilant, but to, ‘be alert, not alarmed’. I’ve always taken that saying to mean that we should watch out and be on our guard, but at the same time we shouldn’t let that stop us from living our lives in the way we are accustomed to. Being alert in this way means going around with our eyes open, always on the lookout for what might happen, but not removing ourselves from the world so that we still live our lives as we normally would.

It is just this kind of watching, being alert, being on guard, that Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel reading. It’s important to note that Jesus doesn’t say ‘wait’ but instead He says, ‘watch!’ The difference is maybe that waiting is passive, whereas watching is active. In this situation this means that to wait means to remove ourselves from the world; to lock ourselves away from the world in a closed community . That’s what people used to do in the past. They would remove themselves from the world so that they wouldn’t be threatened by temptation, or be ‘polluted’ by what was around them. We don’t do it like *this* in our lives, but do we do it in other ways? Perhaps one of the biggest ways that we ‘wait’ rather than ‘watch’ is by putting our ‘God-life’ and our ‘regular-life’ into separate boxes, reserved for different parts of the week. Rather than letting our faith live out in the things we do each day, we might put it away to only be used on special occasions, just in case it gets a bit soiled or worn. Let’s be honest, in whatever part of our life it is, waiting is much easier, isn’t it? It means we can just sit back and allow things to happen without getting involved in the world or what is happening. It involves no pain, and no sacrifice on our part.

Is that how the watching Jesus talks about here really looks, or does it look more like this? (*Jesus carrying His cross*) It is about doing something Jesus talks about a lot;

taking up our cross to follow Him. This does involve taking risks. It does involve personal pain. It does mean that the way God is calling us to go doesn't necessarily follow our plans at the time. It does mean sometimes having to stand out from the crowd in order to be true to what we believe and live that out in our lives. It involves things like forgiving people when we really don't feel like it, accepting ideas and viewpoints we might not necessarily agree with; putting the work and growth of God's kingdom above our own personal preferences and views. Do we always like that? No, we don't. It can be hard to do. But it is also what we are called to do to be a part of God's kingdom and to work for Him. This is the work He has given us to do, along with the warning to keep working because we don't know when He will come back. So again, the message is: keep watch.

For the last three weeks as we have had the theme 'Waiting ...' as we approached the end of the last church year, focusing on how Jesus tells us that we don't know when the end will be, and He gives us the same message here. We also need to remember that for each one of us the end may well be not when Jesus comes again, but when we pass from this life. And it can be sudden, as we know. So, Jesus' warning here is just as much about that as it is about getting ready for when He comes again in glory, the time for which we are now waiting, and watching. But again, that's not something to be afraid of, but to be confident in. And that's where Jesus' promise in this reading comes in: 'The sky and the earth won't last forever, but my words will'. (v. 31) What words is Jesus talking about here? They are the words which stilled the storms. They are the words which drove out demons. They are the words which healed the sick and raised the dead. They are the words which comforted the sad and befriended the lonely. They are the words spoken from the cross; words of forgiveness,

of pain, and of the great cry that all of God's plan to save His people is now finished. And most of all, as we now wait in uncertain times, they are words which also bring us hope, and comfort, and peace, and confidence as we wait. They are the words which mean we don't wait for Jesus to come again with fear and trembling, but with confidence. If we go back to the picture of the parent who leaves children at home with jobs to do and warnings to behave, we know that we look forward to the closing of the car door, the footsteps walking in, and the familiar voice calling out in greeting; when He comes we don't have to be worried or afraid, because we know that His words will be words of love and forgiveness. We are called to keep watch, but we are also called to be confident because we know the love and the power of the One we are watching for.

The theme of this first week in Advent is to 'watch'. It is a call to live our lives as God's people in the world, doing the work He has given us to do because we don't know when He will come again. Thank God we can be confident as we watch, knowing that we do this living in the hope and joy of His forgiveness and love. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- How do you feel at this time of the year; overwhelmed with what has to be done, or totally in control and on top of it all? Based on this, do you approach the Christmas celebration with a sense of joy and anticipation, or of dread due to what leads up to it?
- As Christians we are called to 'watch', to be ready in an active way, for when Jesus comes again. What does that look like for you? Are there any aspects of this you struggle with?
- It can be tough, a struggle, even a challenge, to faithfully keep watch for Jesus, living out our faith and witness in the way we are called to do. In what ways does God love for us in Jesus, and Jesus' words of comfort and power, help you with this?

Pray: thank God for the love and confidence we have in Jesus. Ask God to help us to be faithful and confident as we watch and wait for Him.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler  
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