**3rd December 2017 Advent Sunday**

**Isaiah 64.1-9; Mark 13. 24-37**

The cheery news this week was of course the announcement that Prince Harry had got engaged to the American actress Meghan Markle. Whilst one British American relationship is growing closer another one, President to Prime minister is, thankfully, growing apart.

For Harry and Meghan it was love at first sight. Not for him, grand princely gestures of affection but a night in with a home cooked roast chicken, down on one knee and pop the question. What’s the fuss about being a Royal eh? I wonder whether the Queen is having sleepless nights about this. The last time a member of the Royal family married an American divorcee it all ended badly. Mrs Simpson forced the abdication of King Edward back in the 1930s which meant her father George came to the throne and then ultimately she took over as monarch. I’m sure she will have a few private concerns as all grandparents and parents have about the future of their kids.

I don’t know what keeps you awake at night?

There of course is the physiology of being kept awake. I am now of that age when I know it’s not a good idea to have coffee much after midday on=otherwise I won’t’ e babel to get to sleep at night. I know if I have a late night cuppa I may need to get up to the loo in the idle of the night. I know it can be fatal to check emails and Facebook and other social media as you are lying in bed just about to try and get to sleep. Something can set you off or make you respond and instead of your body powering down for a night’s rest you have pressed the recharge button.

I get kept awake by excitement. Say my football team has just won a game that night and are now challenging for a place in Europe – Burnley fans have not known this for fifty years – you can lie awake and dream: should I start saving for a trip to Real Madrid or Barcelona?

Going on trips when you have to set off early in the morning is always a good way of keeping you awake at night. ‘I must go to bed early so I’m not too tired in the morning for the long journey’. ‘I must go to sleep – these are precious hours – otherwise I will be tired’: nothing like saying you ‘must go to sleep’ for ensuring you don’t go to sleep.

Christmas Eve of course will be the night when most children under a certain age don’t go to sleep. This is a spoiler alert – mainly because it was a spoiler alert – I remember having the myth of Father Christmas exposed when one Christmas Eve my father decided to put all the Christmas presents at the bottom of my bed. As a 6 year old I of course wasn’t asleep and saw him through the corner of my eye rummaging around with the presents. He even swore at one point because he couldn’t see in the dark and dropped one.

On a more serious note, I, like many people, are kept awake at night by anger, conflicts, fears, doubts, worries, ill health. Some people of course suffer from insomnia and have the dread of night-time.

It is therefore a bit disconcerting that the gospel reading for Advent Sunday tells us to keep awake.

***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 cock 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!”’*

Mark, like Matthew and Luke after him, believed that Christ would come soon, during the lifetime of some of the contempories of Jesus (see Mark 9.1, 13.30). It may also have been the case, though this is still much disputed, that Jesus too expected the end of the present age and the beginning of the age to come within a short period. Apocalyptic expectations are usually set within a brief future; this is why Mark’s congregation is commanded to keep awake.

But this section of the gospel should not be read in isolation from the previous verses in this chapter in which the emphasis is not on thinking that the end is near (e.g. 5-7, 21f). The coming of Christ will be unmistakable; it will be preceded by cosmic disasters, about which there can be no doubt. Notice also in verse 32 ‘only the Father knows the day and the hour’. Good to quote to Jehovah Witnesses or other ‘prophets’ next time they want to scare you and get you to do what they want. Mark’s purpose, in part, is to contradict those who are saying that ‘the day of the Lord is already here’ (2 Thess 2.2)

The earliest followers of Jesus looked forward to an age to come on a new earth, in resurrected bodies. Jesus would gather his chosen from all-over the world, and they would be changed. Mark has shown his readers how Jesus is the one to deliver people from sickness and death, whether in this life or the next, and how Jesus can overcome the wind and the storms. Whatever is going to happen we need to be awake and trusting in Christ. He is our Saviour – is the message.

The oldest Christian prayers that we know were for this salvation to happen through Christ: *Thy kingdom Come, thy will be done. Maranatha: Come Lord Jesus Come.*

But as they waited for that moment to come they needed to be awake, alert, watchful in the world and the place they found themselves at the present.

What does it mean to be awake, alert and watchful as followers of Christ today?

Of course there is the obvious need to keep our faith active and healthy. Do we have a good diet of personal devotion in prayer, bible reading and reflection, public devotion – sharing in worship and fellowship with other Christians that will build up our faith and encourage us in our faith, and then putting our faith into action – some form of service, whether within the church or outside the church – where we do something that will benefit others or express the love of Christ. If our diet is not good we need a spiritual health check – we need to be awake, alert and watchful about our own faith.

But as followers of Christ we are also called by our Lord to be salt and Light in our society – we need to be awake, alert and watchful as to what is happening in our society and how sin and evil is at work.

Stephen Tomkins in the URC’s Reform Magazine editorial this month writes how [[1]](#endnote-1) after Remembrance Sunday, an occasion which, by revisiting world wars, always fills him with a sense of how fragile our civilised life of peace and security is.

He writes: ‘*Others see things differently though, and 11 November, being Poland’s independence day, was also the occasion of the largest display of neo-fascism Europe has seen. Warsaw doesn’t need poppies – The Washington Post noted that demonstrators passed buildings still marked with fascist bullets from the Second World War. But the lesson some people learn from them is something rather different from ‘Never again’.*

*Memories of the Charlottesville rally in August are still fresh, and just as President Trump proved reluctant to criticise his far-right supporters,* (this was written before the outrageous tweets supporting far right groups stoking hatred of Muslims this week by Trump*) so Polish government ministers called the Warsaw march ‘beautiful’ and ‘patriotic’ before being persuaded to condemn its white supremacist slogans. The far right seems to be finding its niche in western politics. In Austria, the far-right Freedom Party looks likely to form part of a coalition government*. (My daughter who is in Vienna this year tells me that this party is openly neo Nazi and actually says Hitler was great for Austria).

Tomkins continues:

*Throughout my lifetime it has felt as if Europe’s memories of the Second World War were enough to ensure that such times would not come again. But the outbreak of that war was itself proof that you can live through a world war, swear to end all wars and then do the whole thing again 20 years later. Neo-fascism is still very marginal, but there are enough grim ghosts of the 1930s in the streets, for it all to seem bleakly cyclical. ‘History repeats itself,’ in Louis de Bernière’s version of Marx’s quip, ‘first as tragedy, and then again as tragedy.’*

*Time to turn to Christmas with its prophetic message of hope and angelic message of peace. If that’s a story that we want to hear and believe, how much more is it a story that we need to be telling? If it can overcome stories of fear and hatred, then God help us to speak out and to be heard.*

Fascism is defined as a political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition.

Now I don’t want the Islamization of Western Europe. My hope would be for a re Christianization of Western Europe. But I need to be awake and alert to those who want to resist the former and promote the latter by hatred and bigotry. That is not the way of Christ. Jesus did no go round hating people and spreading false fears about people who were different in whatever way. Neither did Jesus turn away people in need, whether they were refugees, asylum seekers or broken and destitute people but acted compassionately. Part of being awake, alert and watchful is being awake, alert and watchful of the Lord – ‘What would Jesus Do’ may be a crude and simplistic slogan but it’s not a bad yardstick to measure all our reactions and actions to life’s events.

The UK was the first country in the world to begin to establish human rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. There are seven important aspects of freedom of religion that have developed in the UK over the last five centuries[[2]](#endnote-2):

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| **Freedom** | **Year achieved** |
| to read the Bible in public | 1547 |
| to interpret the Bible without government interference | 1559 |
| of worship | 1689 |
| to choose or change your faith or belief | 1689 |
| to preach and try to convince others of the truth of your beliefs | 1812 |
| to build churches, synagogues, mosques etc. | 1812 |
| from being required to affirm a particular worldview or set of beliefs in order to hold a public sector job or stand for election | various “Test Acts” requiring this were abolished between 1719 and 1888 |

This heritage of freedom of religion spread out from Britain to countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and many others around the world. It is one of the most important parts of Britain’s heritage. But it is under attack.

Many Universities, supposed to be bastions of free speech, now have a policy of non-platforming some speakers and organisations they deem to be discriminatory or heretical to the common consensus. Germaine Greer, a feminist, made clear her opinion that men who regarded themselves as women were not, even through surgery, actually members of the female sex, this was judged to be offensive and a campaign was mounted to stop her speaking at Cardiff University. Universities say that they defend diversity, in other words non-discrimination, when the true diversity for which universities should stand, namely diversity of opinion, has been steadily eroded and in many places destroyed entirely.

*Britain First* are undermining the UK’s heritage of freedom of religion. But there is also increasing Christianophobia in the UK, coming from a variety of sources.  In the last few years we have seen a Crown Prosecution Service lawyer [claim in court](https://barnabasfund.org/news/In-2017-the-UK-capitulated-to-a-new-blasphemy-law-Christian-street-preachers-convicted-for-quoting-the-King-James-Bible)[[3]](#endnote-3) that, in the context of modern Britain, quoting from the King James Bible in public *“*must be considered to be abusive and is a criminal matter;*”* we have seen attempts to enforce government registration and Ofsted inspection of [Sunday schools](https://barnabasfund.org/downloads/resources/papers/Regulation_of_institutions_teaching_young_people_BF_Response.pdf)[[4]](#endnote-4); and in the last general election we saw several [major media outlets](https://barnabasfund.org/news/Christianophobia-awards-BuzzFeed-Daily-Mirror-Independent-and-Spectator-out-Christian-candidates-as-unfit-to-hold-office-because-they-are-Christians)[[5]](#endnote-5), including the BBC, Buzz Feed, The Daily Mirror, The Independent and The Spectator, either asking Christian candidates overtly theological questions or claiming that, because they held Biblical Christian beliefs such as believing in miracles or Christian marriage, they were “unfit” to hold public office.

Fascism is alive and well in our country and in our world: the suppression of opposition and the diversity of opinions. Let us keep awake and alert to the agents of hatred and oppression.

Human beings are hope shaped creatures. The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future. I read a story a while back about two men who were captured and thrown into a dungeon. Just before they went into prison, one man discovered that his wife and child were dead, and the other learned that his wife and child were alive and waiting for him. In the first couple of years of imprisonment the first man just wasted away, curled up and died. But the other man endured and stayed strong and walked out a free man ten years later.

Notice that these two men experienced the very same circumstances but responded differently because, while they experienced the same present, they had their minds set on different futures. It was the future that determined how they handled the present.

The bible ripples with hope that God will act, God will save, God will restore. You can hear through Isaiah to Mark. The first Christians for whom Mark was writing to stay alert, awake, watch, took their suffering with great poise and peace. They sang hymns as the beasts were tearing them apart in the Roman amphitheatres. They forgave the people who were killing them. And so the more they were killed, the more the Christian movement grew. Why? Because when people watched Christians dying like that, they said, ‘These people have got something’. They had hope.

If you lie awake at night because you are suffering, turn to the God of hope. Do you believe that when you die you rot? That life in this world is all the happiness you will ever get? Do you believe that someday the sun is going to die and all human civilization is going to be gone? That’s one way to imagine your future. But here’s another. Do you believe in the new heavens and the new earth? Do you believe in a Judgement Day when every evil deed and injustice will be redressed? Do you believe you are headed for a future of endless joy? Those are two utterly different futures and depending on which you believe, you are going to handle your dungeons, your sufferings, in two utterly different ways.

Donald Barnhouse was the minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia but lost his wife when his daughter was still a child.[[6]](#endnote-6) His daughter was terribly upset and couldn’t sleep, so troubled was she by her grief in losing her mother. Revd Barnhosue was trying to help his little girl and himself, process the loss of his wife and her mother. Once when they were driving, a huge moving van passed them. As it passed, the shadow of the truck swept over their car. The minster had a thought. He said something like this, ‘would you rather be run over by a truck, or by its shadow?’ His daughter replied, ‘by the shadow of course. That can’t hurt us at all.’ Revd Barnhouse replied, ‘Right. If the truck doesn’t hit you, but only its shadow, then you are fine. Well, it was only the shadow of death that went over your mother. She’s actually alive – more alive than we are. And that’s because two thousand years ago, the real truck of death hit Jesus. And because death crushed Jesus, and we believe in him, now the only thing that can come over us is the shadow of death, and the shadow of death is but our entrance into glory’

If the death of Jesus Christ happened for us and he bore our hopelessness so that now we can have hope – and if the resurrection of Jesus Christ happened – then even the worst things will turn into the best things, and the greatest are yet to come when he returns.

Hopefully if you keep alert, awake and watchful of our great Christian hope it will help you to sleep at night.

Maranatha – Come Lord Jesus Come.

1. <http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2017/11/editorial-remembrance-and-resolutions/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://barnabasfund.org/news/We-need-to-tackle-BOTH-Muslimophobia-AND-Christianophobia?audience=GB> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://barnabasfund.org/news/In-2017-the-UK-capitulated-to-a-new-blasphemy-law-Christian-street-preachers-convicted-for-quoting-the-King-James-Bible> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://barnabasfund.org/downloads/resources/papers/Regulation_of_institutions_teaching_young_people_BF_Response.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://barnabasfund.org/news/Christianophobia-awards-BuzzFeed-Daily-Mirror-Independent-and-Spectator-out-Christian-candidates-as-unfit-to-hold-office-because-they-are-Christians> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. From T Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, Hodder, 2013, ch 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)