

“Are we nearly there?” “How long to go before we arrive?” These are questions that, I’m sure, every parent can identify with. They are the sorts of questions that often drift across from the back seat during a car trip. Indeed, the more eagerly anticipated the destination, the more regularly they drift across from the back seat. I can’t remember my children ever asking these questions on the way to the dentist. They asked them a lot on the way to the beach or a holiday destination.

In the first two Combined Services for 2017, we have been thinking about our future hope as Christians - the vibrant, wonderful future God has in store for us. It is a glorious hope of being an imperishable, Spirit-controlled person in a new, perfect creation in which all the trials we presently face will be over. It is a firm and secure hope won for us by Jesus’ death and resurrection on our behalf. With such a wonderful destination to be looking forward to - a new creation created for, ruled over by and united under Christ - we can’t help but ask, “Are we nearly there yet?” “How long to go?”

The New Testament describes the return of Jesus Christ - his Second Coming - as the definitive event that will usher in this future. It is with Jesus’ return that the final, definitive judgment of humanity will occur and the new heavens and the new earth will arrive. The apostle Peter gives one of the clearest descriptions of this climactic event in the passage we read from 2 Peter:1-13. Three key aspects of Jesus’ return are apparent from this passage.

#### 1. An Inevitable Return

Perhaps the key truth Peter is wishing to stress in this passage is that Jesus’ return will happen. It seems that some people were doubting this at the time of Peter’s writing. He describes how “in the last days” scoffers and sceptics will claim that Jesus won’t return at all. The “last days” is a New Testament phrase used to denote the time period between Jesus’ first appearance and his return. The “last days” period commenced at Pentecost when Jesus’ disciples received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14-17) and they will conclude on the last day of history when Jesus returns. A term like “last days” sounds as if there aren’t going to be many days within this period of history. When you see a sign saying, “Hurry! Sale! Last days!” that usually means you better get in quick before the Sale ends and the bargains are gone. But it’s been around 2,000 years since the New Testament’s “last days” officially started. How long will these “last days” last? And so some people in Peter’s day were saying that Jesus wasn’t coming back at all and it was silly to think that he was. You don’t have to try very hard to find similar scoffers today. If at some work function or neighbourhood party, you casually drop into the conversation that Jesus Christ will return, you can be pretty sure that you’ll discover some scoffers very quickly.

Peter’s response to these sceptics is threefold. First, he points out that Jesus’ return is a sure thing based on the simple fact that God has said it is going to happen. And what God says happens. Peter reminds us that God formed the entire world simply by speaking (v. 5). God’s word is powerful enough to achieve whatever he says. We can never guarantee that we will keep appointments because things may happen beyond our control which prevent us from keeping our undertaking to be somewhere at a certain time - things such as a meeting running late, or our train being delayed or our car breaking down or getting caught in heavy traffic. But nothing is beyond God’s control. He is good, faithful and powerful and nothing is going to stop him keeping his promise about the future - indeed it’s God himself who brings the future into being. God has promised that Jesus will appear again - and he will. You can be sure of it.

Peter’s second compelling reason for the inevitability of Jesus’ return is that God has already judged the world once before, at the time of Noah and the flood (v.6). In other words, God has a track record for dealing with sin! So why would we doubt that he’ll do it again? God’s sense of holiness, righteousness and justice means that he will not let sin go unpunished forever. Jesus will return, judgment will be handed down and the new creation will be ushered in. The very character of God makes it inevitable.

The third reason Peter gives for the inevitability of Jesus' return is that God has only delayed it thus far out of loving mercy. It isn't that God has forgotten about Jesus' return. It's not that he has changed his mind or that he can't decide how to send Jesus back. The reason Jesus has not returned yet is because God is patient and doesn't want anyone to perish (v.9). In other words, time doesn't matter much to God. People matter to God. For this reason, God is holding off Jesus' appearing and the arrival of the new creation so that more people might have the chance to repent and be ready for it. His deep desire is for many to be saved. God's loving patience actually raises some interesting implications for us, doesn't it? If the very reason God has delayed Jesus' return is so that people might be saved, it's not hard to guess what we, his people, should be doing - surely we should be telling people about Jesus! That's the mission God has given us.

## 2. An Inescapable Return

Wherever you are, whatever you are doing and whoever you are with, you will not miss Jesus' return. Peter tells us that all things will be destroyed on that day (v.11). Everything. It will be a massive cosmic event, which will affect everyone you know, and during which everything will vanish in a roar. The apostle Paul makes a similar point in the passage we read from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. The church in Thessalonica was concerned about people who had already died, thinking that those people might miss out on the establishment of the new creation. But Paul explains that Jesus' return will be such an inescapable event that even those who have died will be raised so as to not miss it. The Lord will descend "with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" and the dead in Christ will rise first - to be joined in the clouds to by those in Christ who are still alive and to meet the Lord in the air. The return of Jesus will be an inescapable event - you do not know a single person, living or dead, who will not be affected by it.

This passage from 1 Thessalonians brings us to a related and reasonable question: where are Christians who have already died? If our ultimate future is to be in a new physical creation, what about all those Christians who have died before the new creation has arrived? Where are they now? Several New Testament passages suggest that deceased Christians are with Jesus now, waiting for the new creation to arrive. For example, Jesus promises one of the criminals crucified along side him that that very day he would be with Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:43). Similarly, the apostle Paul speaks of departing this life in order to "be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23). It would therefore seem that between our death and bodily resurrection, we are consciously in the presence of Christ.

To be honest though, the New Testament doesn't seem very interested in our intermediate state between death and resurrection. It is much more interested in our eternal life after our resurrection. For this reason the focus of the New Testament is not on those who have died (other than to reassure us that they won't miss anything) but on those who are still living. The focus of the New Testament is that you and I should be ready for the inevitable, inescapable and cataclysmic return of Jesus. And we need to be especially ready because, when it does occur, Jesus' return will also be unexpected.

## 3 An Unexpected Return

When a thief strikes, stealing a car from someone's driveway or a purse from someone's handbag or electronic goods from someone's home, it's always unexpected, always sudden, always surprising. The apostles Paul and Peter both describe the return of Jesus as like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). This image tells us that even though we know with certainty that this event is coming we don't really know exactly when it will arrive. For this reason the New Testament writers urge us to be ready for it. Paul urges the Thessalonian church to "be alert and self-controlled". In other words, be prepared - be primed and waiting for it. Nobody makes this point more powerfully than Jesus himself. After telling the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, he concludes, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or hour" (Matthew

(2 Peter 3:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; Matthew 25:1-13)

25:13). The testimony of the New Testament is pretty clear. The return of Jesus and the arrival of the new creation will happen suddenly and at any moment. So make sure you are ready for it!

In Jesus' parable, the wise virgins were those who thought through the possibility of the bridegroom being delayed and so took extra oil for their lamps. They planned ahead, looked to the future and made their decisions accordingly. Wise waiting for Jesus' return is the same.

The wise follower of Jesus looks to the future, appreciates their eternal inheritance is in the new creation and therefore shapes their plans and priorities accordingly. They are focused and clear-minded about the future. The apostle Peter describes it this way in his first letter: "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:13). Waiting wisely therefore involves training our minds and focusing our thinking so that our behaviour is appropriate. For example, if you think it's really important to wear certain clothes to an upcoming event and you haven't got those clothes, then certain actions will follow - you will go out and buy appropriate clothes. That is because thinking shapes our behaviour. That's why Paul urges the Roman Christians "not to conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

How do we renew our minds so as to keep our future hope at the forefront of our thinking? Well, prayer is a good start. One of Paul's prayers for the Ephesian Christians was that they would have "the eyes of (their) heart.....enlightened in order that (they) may know the hope to which he (God) has called (them), the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1:18). Paul wanted the Ephesians to understand their hope so that they would then be equipped to make the best life choices.

Reading God's Word regularly and thoughtfully is another helpful way to keep hope at the forefront of our minds. God's word expands our horizons and brings our thinking into line with his. In Hebrews, the word of God is described as "sharper than any double-edged sword.....(penetrating) even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). This is a good thing. We want God's Spirit to apply his word into our lives, cutting away anything that might distract us from Jesus Christ and the hope he gives us. Being disciplined at reading the Bible will therefore help us wisely keep our thoughts focused on our hope.

The problem is that every day we are being bombarded with the world's way of thinking. The mass media, advertising agencies, even family and friends, are all filling our minds with ideas, desires and priorities that are focused on this creation and not the new creation. It has been estimated that the average adult is exposed to about 360 advertisements each day from TV, radio, the internet, newspapers and magazines. We are naïve if we think that doesn't affect us! Unless we are taking substantial blocks of time and energy to think and talk about the things of God, our minds will simply be overrun by the flood of materialistic, individualistic and pleasure-seeking ideas that our culture endlessly promotes.

Waiting wisely for the new creation, for the return of Jesus, involves clarity of focus and sharpness of thinking. It involves spending time in the Scriptures and aligning our minds with the mind of Christ. It involves thinking beyond this world to the world to come. And it affects every area of our lives - how we treat our spouses, how we raise our children, how we choose our friends, how we weigh up ideas and make decisions, how we spend our money, how we have conversations, how we use our free time. In all these things we ask ourselves, "How is this action shaped by my hope in eternity and the new creation?" I wonder, are you living each day in the light of your Christian hope? Are you ready for Christ's return? Are you living wisely as you wait for that great day?

Amen

*Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.*