Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 30th November 2025

Bible passages: Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

I don't know what you remember about the period of time ahead of the first Covid Lockdown.

When the first French lockdown started, on March 17th, I had to make a choice. Like a number of us here, our family had two bases, one in Lyon and one in Nimes, and because I anticipated the lockdown, I had to make a decision about where I was going to find myself confined. And we were confined – Ben and I did that first lockdown in a one bedroomed flat without a balcony, next door to a beautiful park which remained closed.

The words of today's Gospel reading kept floating back to me at that time, and I couldn't decide if they were appropriate or if my mind was just playing a random association game: 'For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, **until the day**'...

I guess I was struck by the parallels, people had been going about life as normal, getting on with the good things and the ordinary things and the difficult things, with all the while this huge event waiting to shock us out of our complacency. In the Gospel reading, Jesus compares the days of Noah to his own times, to our own times. He warns about a sudden change, which no one anticipated.

But, in each case, it would have been possible to anticipate. God warned Noah, and Noah prepared. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is warning people to 'keep awake'. Keeping awake sounds easier than building an ark.

Now, we know that some groups have developed fanciful and even harmful theologies or mythologies around Jesus' sayings in this chapter, but that doesn't mean we can abandon what Jesus said. Like the people before the flood, like all of us before Covid, life would potentially *feel* easier if we could abandon Jesus' words. We don't want to face up to the idea of change, or of reckoning, Whatever Jesus is talking about when he speaks of one being taken and one being left, it's pretty unsettling.

It's at this point that we'd better look at the prophecy from Isaiah. It's one of Isaiah's prophecies about the coming judgement, often referred to as the Day of the Lord. When Jesus refers to 'that Day, the day your Lord is coming', it's this kind of judgement day he's talking about.

Great, now the preacher is talking about Judgement Day. You should have known better than to come to church on Advent Sunday, right? We do get these themes as Advent begins.

But look at the Isaiah reading. This day, which certainly is a day of judgement, is the day when a beautiful thing will happen. In that wonderful metaphor of hope and peace, the day of God's judgement is the day when swords will become useless unless they're turned into farm equipment. On God's Day, spears will be so irrelevant, they are repurposed into agricultural tools. Items used to kill, will be useless. Tools for nurture and fruitfulness will be what everyone needs, because under God's peace, weapons become obsolete.

We fear judgement, we reject the idea of judgement, for a mixture of reasons. I guess it's partly because we've taken the message 'do not judge' a little bit too extensively – we take a message which is essential for humans, and extend it to God too. It's true, we don't have the right to judge each other. But this promise of *God's* judgement is the promise of wrong being put right. And in the OT reading, Isaiah says that this includes the end of war and, quite literally, God's will being done 'on earth, as it is in heaven'.

So let's bear this in mind as we go back to the gospel. Jesus says that, as we wait for 'that day and hour', as we wait for God's kingdom to be finally established 'on earth as it is in heaven', we have one task. That task is to be ready. That task is to keep awake.

Looking back to Jesus' Noah reference, people before the flood were going about their everyday lives, and the story tells us that those lives were violent and particularly horrible to God. The people were not expecting any kind of judgement, they were not tuned in to the natural laws of justice and fairness which a society may develop. Instead, Noah's time seems to have had an 'every man for himself' culture of violence and exploitation. Jesus contrasts this to 'being awake'. Living for yourself, living without regard for others, living without an awareness of what God is doing in the world: these seem to be the characteristics Jesus identifies with 'being asleep'.

But we're not asleep, are we? We want to align ourselves with the work of God in the world. We pray, not just in church on Sundays, but at home, at work, at school, when the siren sounds, or maybe with the Lectio 365 app or a prayer book. We don't want to live for ourselves, without regard for others. We have an inherited moral and ethical culture which comes from Christian teaching, and we know selfishness is wrong. We're not asleep, are we?

If you'll forgive me for saying it, we may not be deep asleep and snoring, but maybe we're a bit drowsy? Maybe we're in that comfortable state where it's possible to keep on functioning, but it's almost autopilot? Maybe for you it feels more like running on empty, still up and going because there's no choice, but exhaustion has set in?

Maybe this drowsiness is similar to the way the majority of us faced the first Covid lockdown. Everything goes on as normal, until suddenly we wake up to the fact that there was something else going on, all the time. Any of you who come from a country at war have experienced a much, much harsher, version of this. And the further east in Europe you come from, the more you are waking up to the risks and dangers of further invasions, the real possibility of attack.

Is this why Jesus is telling us to stay awake? I think it's part of it – 'reading the signs of the times' is something Jesus encourages his disciples to do. But for all that Jesus compares the coming day to the arrival of a thief in the night, it doesn't seem he's saying it will involve criminality and violence. It's the opposite of criminal, it's the day of justice. So how do we stay awake, waiting for this arrival of our Lord?

Advent is the beginning of our preparations for Christmas, so let's take Mary as our example. When Mary was given the alarming and unexpected task of preparing for the coming of Jesus, for his birth, how did she prepare? She is, after all, a wonderful example to us.

We know a few things Mary did, to prepare herself for the birth, for 'the day her Lord was coming'.

She prayed in a way which was informed by her scriptures. The Siren Prayer we'll share tomorrow is based on her words: she prayed, wide awake to the reality of God's justice. She praised God because he was going to bring down the established order of power and oppression, and would lift up the lowly and feed the hungry. A vision of justice not far from Isiah's image of turning swords into ploughshares. Mary also visited a relative and prayed with her. And she had some challenging conversations with her fiancé Joseph, trusting he was also prayerful enough to wake up to what God was doing.

Mary stayed spiritually awake, waiting for the Lord, by tuning in to the ways he was at work in the world, and in her own life.

She stayed awake by keeping in close contact, even when it was challenging, with other key people of faith.

So when her son, Jesus, warns us to stay awake in our own times, we can look back to his first coming, celebrated at Christmas. Like Mary, we can stay awake by prayerfully reading God's promises of goodness and justice in the Bible. Like Mary, we can stay awake by praying for our world today, based on those promises from God. Like Mary, we can submit to God's will in our lives, being prepared to line ourselves up with his work, rather than attempting things our way. Like Mary, we can keep up prayerful connections to others who are also seeking God's way. Like Mary, as we wait for Jesus, we can accept difficult conversations and challenging times rather than avoiding them, because we know the spirit of God is with us when we join his mission in the world.

Let's bow our heads and pray.

Lord Jesus, you tell us to stay awake. You tell us to expect the unexpected. You tell us that you are coming, with a future of justice which no one can anticipate in the current troubles of the world. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, so that we live in active prayer and grateful obedience, as we wait and prepare for you.

Amen