**Responses to the promised 2nd Coming. Matt. 24: 36-44 & Rom. 13:11-14**

When I was doing my National Service the General’s Inspection was a much feared event. A General would come to check on the unit’s efficiency, good order & paperwork, so there was a great flurry of tidying in preparation. The Privates would joke that ‘if it moved you saluted it & if it did not, you painted it white!’ This echoed the origin of Advent, which came from the Latin Adventus “coming”, when in the later Roman Empire the ruler would come to the provinces to check on the defences-were the troops ready?-& the civil administration, resulting in much tidying up. Likewise, Advent describes the preparations to celebrate Jesus’ First Coming-the Nativity-that leads on to the climax of His Second Coming. Advent is, also, the start of the liturgical year for the Church, when it celebrates & recalls Jesus’ life & ministry on earth to refresh our faith with the pivots of Christmas, Easter (the Resurrection), Pentecost, the Church’s inauguration & Trinity, dealing with the Godhead-Three in One & One in Three. In part, since the Second Coming has not happened yet, it is linked to Advent. Additionally, it emphasises that the First Coming is part of a process, which ends with the Second Coming-Christmas is, really, the beginning of the end for Satan & our old fallen world. According to my SU notes earlier in the week “Jesus was, indeed, born that there might be peace on earth, but it will not happen until He returns to establish the new world order. That we must still await-not sleeping but watching eager for it but wise about the times we face.”

The Gospel reading shows Jesus stressing that His return is certain, imminent, sudden & unexpected v. 42, while the actual day is known only to the Father v36. His return will be obvious in the same way that a flash of lightning in the east lights up the whole sky v27, so there will be no need for rumours of His secret return v26. He will come to judge the world, put right all wrongs & bring in a New Heaven & a New Earth. There is a danger for believers to become complacent, since the date is unknown. As I read in the SU notes “Jesus will return suddenly, bringing history to an end & ushering in the new world order. We must be ready for God’s new kingdom. Two thousand years of waiting dulls our sense of expectation, but we must be alert, living in eager anticipation of the life to come.” Hence, He urges believers to watch v42, be alert v43 & ready v44 to greet our Lord. To be alert does not mean to be twitchy after every catastrophe, for every epoch has felt the times are so out of joint that the Second Coming must be very near. On the other hand, to be alert & ready involves tidying ourselves & things up in general terms.

What that may mean in detail is found in the Epistle- Rom. 13:11-14. Paul’s emphasis is for believers to be alert & understand “the present time…because our salvation (the Second Coming) is nearer than when we first believed” v11. Therefore, “wake from slumber”, as you can’t be alert, if you’re asleep. He, then, advises how to be alert-with two negative points balanced by two positive ones. He starts, firstly, with “put aside the works of darkness” v12 or those actions, which suit our own selfish approach. He gives three examples of excess with our appetites & wishes-like drinking or immorality or (& this is very telling) “dissension & jealousy.” How often can we envy someone’s position, or life style, or abilities or success? Or, again, the desire to be amusingly provocative or make our point forcefully can so easily lead to dissension or disagreement! All of these we need to give up. Secondly, he urges believers not even to “think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” v14. These selfish desires can so quickly infiltrate our will. There’s a story about a traveller sleeping in his tent, who has a dog or camel outside. It wants to join him. This animal, over time, sweet talks his way in successfully, though the traveller’s tent was too small for both of them! Consequently, we should not chew the cud over some slight or rebuff that upsets us, lest we hit back at some point.

On the positive side, firstly, we’re told v12 to “put on the armour of light.” This may be an act of will to follow putting “aside the works of darkness”, as we pray in the Advent Collect. Eph. 6:11 tells us to “put on the full armour of God so that you take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” This armour includes “the belt of truth buckled round your waist with the breastplate of righteousness (the right relationship with the Lord) in place.”v14. There are more bits- “the shield of faith” v16, “the helmet of salvation & the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.”v17. Secondly, we should “clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ..” v14. Putting on our clothes is a daily occurrence & pinpointing the word ‘Lord’ in Jesus’ title reminds us to put Him in charge of our life for the coming day. I say this as much to myself as anyone else. If we do this daily, we can turn to him for help when faced with temptations & difficulties. As believers we have asked Him into the house of our life, but is He really the boss or in some outhouse, rather than having the run of the whole house, as it were?

How can these negatives & positives help us in our lives? If we are brooding over some slight or attack, we should not chew it over in our minds-we should turn to Him, not even thinking “how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature,” v14, leaving the wrong in His hands & asking Him to be in us the love we need for the situation. If the temptation comes on the spur of the moment-say a grumpy neighbour complaining again unnecessarily, there is the arrow prayer “Lord, be in me now the patience to give a kindly response.” This does mean that, in the background, we, daily, need to “put off the deeds of darkness” & “clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” with all that entails. In this way we can be ready & alert for His Second Coming.