

Jesus, come again?

In a few minutes we will all say in the Creed: "He will come again in glory" and later on "Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ will come again". I wonder what goes through your mind as you say those things. I don't suppose for a moment that you have heard many sermons about the Second Coming of Jesus. It's one of those topics preachers tend to shy away from – me included. But you have heard many sermons, I expect, about the Christmas story - the story of Jesus "first" coming. Well, this morning, I bite the bullet!

If we look at the New Testament, we will find that there is much, much more said about the *second* than the first coming. What seemed very important to them does not seem so important to us - and vice versa. Let's make an analogy: suppose someone who runs a small business said that he was going to go away for a while, but would be back eventually. He might ask them to carry on as normal, but inevitably, the question would keep being asked "When's he coming back?" They might feel they need to make decisions, but don't like to commit themselves to too much until the boss is back. In other words, although "carrying on as normal" would happen to some extent, it would be with some differences - waiting for some unknown moment when things would get *truly* back to normal. It is like that when we are waiting for someone to arrive at home isn't it? We have one eye on the road outside, waiting for the car to arrive - an ear ready the doorbell - "That'll be them arriving now;"

It was like that for the disciples. At the Ascension the disciples were told that Jesus who had disappeared into heaven would return in the same way as they had seen him go. And we gather from the sermons in Acts that this was very much part of the original gospel preaching that the apostles delivered. We heard that sense of imminence in the words from Romans in the Epistle this morning.

But was it part of the message of Jesus? This is by no means clear. Now those of you with a good memory for Biblical quotations may have in mind for example what Luke records Jesus as saying in 9.26: "If anyone is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his own glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy

angels." But we have to ask if the strong interest in the idea of a physical return of Jesus was colouring the way Luke remembered that saying. In Matthew's gospel, it reads quite differently: "But the one who disowns me in the presence of men, I will disown in the *presence of my Father in heaven.*"

There are several examples of this, where a statement in one gospel seems to refer to some future day of the Lord, to a day of coming, and another gospel, recording what is obviously the same saying, seems to be talking about an event in heaven. The more you look at the sayings of Jesus, the more confusing it becomes. Not least are the times when either Jesus meant something different by his "coming" than what the disciples meant, or he was simply wrong about it. So for example in Matthew 10.23 he tells the disciples that they will not have got round the towns of Israel in their missionary work before "the Son of Man comes". So we have to look at whether the classical idea of Christ's return was what he meant by that, or whether he was referring to the events of Easter, or indeed the coming of his Spirit to be with them at Pentecost. Let me give you what is perhaps the most obvious example of all this. Here is one statement as recorded in three gospels:

Mark 9.1: ...there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power....

Luke 9.27: ...there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God...

Matthew 16.28: ...there are some of these standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming with his kingdom.

Now here is the issue: only Matthew's version says anything about the Second Coming at all. And if that was the original version of what Jesus said, then he was wrong, because he did not return in that way before that current generation had died off. But if the other versions, which talk about the *coming Kingdom* are the original, then of course it was wonderfully true - the gospel had spread like wildfire through the civilised world during their lifetime. Or others have argued that the Easter events alone would be ample fulfilment of the idea of the Kingdom being here. Death had been conquered, the new age and the new Covenant with God had begun.

It does seem probable that sayings of Jesus concerning his kingdom became linked by the first generation of believers with ideas about his return. And that is not so surprising, and is perhaps why this became so important to them. They faced a great deal of persecution. They looked for a dramatic intervention of God in that antagonistic world. Clearly something had to happen to show that the message they proclaimed was true. They wanted to be released.

And looking back from the perspective of today, we can see how beliefs in the Second Coming have been more prominent in times of persecution and opposition than they are normally. Just one example which we are all familiar with would be the strong hopes of the return of Jesus in spirituals of the black slaves in America. Oppressed people looking for release were drawn to this whole idea - "Swing low, sweet chariot - coming for to carry me home." But it has been true at other times too.

But finding that the importance of the Second Coming in the teaching of Paul and the other apostles was not the same as it was for Jesus doesn't take away the significance of the whole idea for us. Because Jesus *did* talk about his return, even if not in quite the way they did. He set the first Christians a task of bringing in his Kingdom, making it real in the world in which they lived. There was a goal to be aimed for. They were heading towards a time when God's kingdom would be complete and fulfilled. History was heading towards an end. We live in a curious in-between time. The kingdom has begun, but it is not complete. The end of time will mark that completion. Then things will be as they should be - and that will include the supreme awareness of the presence of Jesus with his people. We can't just spiritualise the whole idea, and make it purely symbolic. The incarnation - God coming the first time to us in Jesus - was real and earthy. His redemption of the world on the Cross was real and earthy. But clearly the story is not over yet - and we should expect that completion to be real and earthy as well.

So we retain this language firmly in our worship, and in our hymns and prayers. We have - as it were - quotation marks that tell the whole story: they stand before the creation at one end, and at this point of completing God's purposes at the other. That we are going towards God as well as coming from God is basic to the way we make sense of everything in between.

We do nothing for Christ and for the cause of his kingdom or ourselves by speculating about some possible future date or day. Those who have tried to do so in the past have made fools of themselves, and brought ridicule on the Christian faith. They have all failed to hear Jesus own

words to his disciples that we heard in the Gospel this morning: "But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; no-one but the Father". And in any case, all this talk of Second Coming seems to be bad mathematics. The first coming in the Holy Land two thousand years ago is obviously number one. But is not the second coming the one we have all experienced in some way or other in our encounter with Jesus? He has come to us. We say this morning that he comes to us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. He is truly with us today.

He has come again. Those two comings - then and now - are quite enough for us to cope with. But we retain this language of a final coming in order to keep our perspectives right. The future, as well as the past and the present, are in God's hands. That last coming, according to the Creed, is a coming "in glory". It is the time of triumph, of the victory of God. Those early Christians who earnestly prayed "Maranatha" - "Come, Lord Jesus" may have had misguided times-scales and mistaken expectations. But they had it absolutely right in that they were looking forward to it, and wanting it to happen. The end of things has come to have a sombre and rather depressing note. But that cannot be right - we are talking of the total completion of the Kingdom, the reign of God, the coming of his peace and -justice and love. It must be something to look forward to.

So let us catch that note of expectancy and urgency which belief that Jesus would return any day gave to those in the first generation, the inspiration to live out our faith in practical ways that we heard Paul talk about. Now is the time to get on with it, he says. Sleepers wake! Jesus does return - to us, and to those around us, and as he does so, we catch a glimpse of his glory. And he will come again, and glory will not just be a glimpse. Even so, Maranatha, come Lord Jesus. Amen.