

Sunday 27th March 2022 – ‘The Hope of Jesus’ Second Coming’ (Acts 1:7-14, 2:42-47)

We all love a good comeback story. I wonder what your favourites are? You’ll find them in most walks of life. In business, a recent great example would be Steve Jobs, fired from Apple in 1985 for being difficult to work with, then re-appointed 12 years later in 1997 and leading the same company he founded to global domination. In politics, it’s hard to look further than Winston Churchill – effectively in political exile in the 1930s, returning as leader of the unity government in 1940 – and the rest, as they say, is history.

Perhaps it’s military comebacks that stick in your mind: for example, General MacArthur, having been defeated in the Philippines in 1942, famously vowed as he left: ‘I shall return’ – which he did, two years later, leading the allies to victory in that region.

Or maybe it’s sport that fires your imagination. Ask any England cricket fan about Headingley in 1981 or 2019, or a Liverpool fan about Istanbul in 2005. I can even remember a great game of playground football when I was 9, when our team came back from 3-2 down to win 7-5 against the school’s best players. It was a lunchtime kickabout, no big deal – but you never forget the thrill of a great comeback!

Today we continue our series ‘Surprised by hope’ by looking at the theme ‘the hope of Jesus’ Second Coming.’ The idea of Jesus’ return is another of those foundational biblical doctrines that we generally avoid nowadays. To be honest, I’m not sure why: as I hope to show over these next few minutes, Jesus’ return is very good news! I think our reluctance is partly based on fantastic images of what the judgement will be like, and perhaps a secret fear of how things will go for us.

It may also be influenced by the generally anti-authority strain in our modern culture. Society has always had rulers and bosses, but we’re more in denial about that than we used to be. In our college common room there was a great variety of mugs we used to use for our coffee breaks: on one of them was a picture of a giant Jesus and the words: ‘Jesus is coming back....’ On the other side of the mug were the words: ‘...look busy.’ On one level we’ll see that there’s some merit in this observation: but it’s the sense that Jesus is a scary, capricious boss who runs an office of disgruntled employees more concerned with keeping up appearances than with more concern.

So what does the reality of Jesus’ return really mean? Every creed testifies to it: the earliest creed agreed by the universal church is absolutely clear on this: ‘he will come again to judge the living and the dead.’ Every time we celebrate communion, ‘we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.’ So this lies at the heart of everything we believe. And in essence, the reason it’s so important is that it ties together everything we’ve been looking at over the last few weeks.

The hope of Jesus’ second coming is based on the biblical confidence that Jesus will one day return to this world, restore creation, heal his people and make all things new. It is the moment at which all things can be reconciled, every wrong put right, and God’s people can finally enjoy the true joy, peace and fullness of life we were created to have, in union with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the eternal Trinity of Love.

In week 1 we thought about why the idea that God would come to judge the world was such a good thing, because it testifies that a day is coming when God will put all things right. In week 2 we thought about the joy of resurrection life, the which we experience in part now, as a preparation for the full reality to come. And last week we thought about heaven as the in-breaking rule of God, which again we get glimpses of here as a foretaste of the glorious reality which will be ours one day. And it is Jesus' return that acts as the catalyst for all of this: this is when things are put right, heaven and earth unite as one healed entity and we share this resurrected life as one people in a renewed creation.

So Jesus' return is something to look forward to! For those of us who fear what the process will be like, our great reassurance is that we are already Jesus' – that when we stand before God, as we all will, Jesus will, if you like, stand with us and say: this one's mine, and this one's mine, and so on. More on that next week.

But as we've reflected over the last few weeks, this confidence in the return of Jesus is not meant to make us passive about this life. As the angels told off the disciples, we're not meant to just stand there looking into the sky, wondering when Jesus will come back. Nor are we meant to waste our energies trying to work out *when* it will happen: Jesus is pretty clear on that – he tells the disciples that, in his human body, not even he knows when it's going to be.

Instead, as Peter says, 'we look forward to the day and speed its coming.' How? Our passage gives us some great pointers: **first, we invest in growing our faith**. The first church devoted themselves to biblical study, prayer and gathering together. They began to cultivate this shared life which we'll all enjoy forever, and to keep it centred in Jesus. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we'll look forward to the return of our best friend.

Second, they dedicated themselves to practical acts of love. They were generous and met the needs of others. This kind of selfless love not only blesses people, it helps the kingdom of God to grow and the world to be more ready for Jesus' return. As we've reflected over these last few weeks, the glorious truths we believe about the future inspire us to live with purpose now.

Third, they were reliant on the Holy Spirit. This purposeful life is a not self-help gospel. What transformed the disciples from a scared clique to a bold movement was the indwelling Spirit of God: 'You will receive power...' Jesus says and he means it. We do all this stuff in the power and name of Jesus: and it is Jesus that brings the real transformation, in us and in others. Some of this is overt, we should expect to see the miraculous wherever Jesus is powerfully at work; but much of it is the quiet miracle of human hearts overflowing with God's love, being changed from the inside out.

On Mothering Sunday we rightly give thanks for all that our mums and other important carers in our lives have done for us. Those of us who have been fortunate to be parents know that our greatest task is to nurture and prepare our kids to live happy, purposeful and independent lives. But we don't achieve this by just spending the time from their birth passively waiting for them to leave: rather we get on with practical parenting, helping them to gain the security and the skills to fly the nest. Jesus' return is like that: knowing that he will return inspires us to live purposefully now: not just to 'look busy,' but to be ready and to live ready for that glorious day. The one who testifies to these things says: 'Yes I am coming soon.' To which we reply: Amen, come Lord Jesus.