

Mark 13:32-37

³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Dear Christian friends,

Be on the lookout, because Christ will return at any moment. We don't know when he will come.

How ready are we to lose everything we have and be fully joined to Christ? Surely, we have relationships, values and possessions that we hold dearly and really want to keep. For most Australians, generations of prosperity have turned us into great materialists. Today, even in the church, Jesus frequently has to ride in the back seat because we have loaded so much else into the front. Sadly, the question we often ask has become: 'How can we protect and preserve what we have built up over the years?' rather than: 'How can we fully serve Christ and be ready for him?'

Today, the Last Sunday of the Church year, and it hits us for six. Christ will return anytime, without regard to who we think we are or what we have. This should be obvious to believers, but seemingly it is not. Even in these fading years of our congregations and our denomination, when we seem to be losing hand over fist, giving it all up for Jesus still seems beyond us. Despite our years of faith and experience of the curious mix of resilience and that is life, we still don't get that it's all temporary. We must leave everything behind.

If we hesitate about doing that when he comes, trying to take some of it with us, then we will lose everything, including our lives. That's how radical this is. Therefore, listen to what Jesus says in Mark 13: 'What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!'

Now what does he mean to *watch*?

Let's use three points to summarise it. **Firstly**, to watch for Christ is to have faith; **secondly**, to watch for Christ is to be the people he made us to be; and **thirdly**, to watch for Christ is to do the things he want us to do.

Firstly, then, to watch for Christ is to have faith. This means complete confidence that he will keep his promise and come through for us. We are in his hands, and we fully accept that. Faith is taking Jesus at his word, accepting the forgiveness and new life he offers, and staying firmly fixed on his cross of salvation.

If we treat our faith lightly we will go to sleep. We will drowsily forget he is coming back, and live as though things will always go on the way they are now. Spiritual sleep makes us lazy in our relationship with God and we barely bother to pass the time of day with him. We are too wrapped up in our own most important affairs. If we are asleep like that, we'll be in for a great shock when he is suddenly here. We simply won't be ready.

But faith wakes us to what's going on. We are in a dangerous place where we can't afford to fall asleep. An abyss has opened up between us and God. We are falling into it. Jesus reaches out to grab hold of us and rescue us from this certain death. The gift of baptismal faith assures us of his presence, his love, and his power. The Holy Spirit shows us a glimpse of heaven, and sustains our faith so that we will be ready when the time comes for us to all go there. We will be awake when he comes.

Secondly, to watch for Christ is to be the people he made us to be. Faith has not only rescued us from death, it also has turned us around, away from ourselves and toward God and our neighbours.

As we watch for Christ, in practical terms we are to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We can only do that because of faith. God carries us into this new reality. One of the risks, if I can call it that, of our great Lutheran focus on grace as a free gift, is that we can too quickly give up on importance of doing good works, not to earn salvation, but to prepare ourselves and others for the coming of Christ. In him we are new people who can and want to do new things – good things. Faith means radical changes in us and our behaviours.

The person of faith is no longer just a selfish sinner, but also a selfless saint. God converts us, changing one thing into another. Baptism, faith, and conversion to Christ changes us into new people, totally in tune with the will of God.

Thirdly, to watch for Christ is to do the things he want us to do, things we would want him to find us doing when he comes. Those who have been made good through Christ will go on to do good in the world, since it agrees with their new nature. When we are in tune with God and his will, our actions will also be in harmony.

Unless we are set free from our selfish anxieties and concerns we will never do a successful good work for our Father. We will still be thinking of ourselves. The cost benefit equation will be playing out in our hearts and in our heads. Only when God has swept all that away through the death and resurrection of Jesus, gifted to us in the water and the word of baptism, will our selfish love of position and possessions no longer have control over us. No longer do we need to look over our shoulders. We are free to be and free to do what God would have us be and do.

This is the pivot point of all the complex questions we have about Christian living. If we do those things we would gladly do in the open, when everyone, including God, is watching, then we are getting ready for Christ to return.

But we have a problem. Even knowing all this, we still continue to do things that we try to hide from God and others with arguments and defences. But we must realise that it's impossible to defend oneself before Jesus. When he's around, all we can do is humbly receive forgiveness and reconciliation, no matter how justifiable we think our sin is.

Apart from saving faith, then, probably the most important thing that we Christians have to learn to be ready for Jesus is repentance. The flip side of conversion, repentance is to turn away from ourselves and turn towards God. As sinners, even when we try to please God we are involved in sin! So, we must confess our sins and always turn back to God in faith, on our knees, ready for his return. In his Catechism Martin Luther reminds us that this is the daily journey of faithful baptised saints.

Those outside Christianity, looking at our behaviours, can be forgiven for seeing our faith as a religion of failed ideals. But we know it as a journey of repentance and love, undeserved forgiveness, new life and salvation. This is the real-life love of God by which he sent his flesh and blood Son into the world. And that Son is now coming back again to take us to be with him where he is. By God's grace we can be ready for that, ready for heaven, no matter what or who we may currently be, or what we may have done.

We don't know when he will come, so we are always on the lookout, staying awake and watching. Faith, a new being, and good works are all part of that pattern of staying awake, looking out, and doing his will. Soon, he will return to judge the living and the dead, and to take all believers with him into glory. Pray, then, that we will be ready when he comes.

Amen.