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their former partners. The injustice and the horror go nowhere, and neither does the very real danger that the perpetrators unwittingly place themselves in. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture", warns God in Isaiah. Yet in the midst of the pain there is grace. As Jesus expresses a new level of trust in God, and the criminal dying with him expresses a new level of trust in Jesus, the impossible begins to become possible. Those who are executing Jesus so cruelly are given the hope of redemption. And the men condemned to death alongside Jesus, have the option of embracing forgiveness and finding their astonished way into the kingdom of heaven.

And so, through this extraordinary moment, Paul is able to boast of how in Jesus, God is able "to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross". This is costly stuff, and we must not abuse it. Reconciliation does not mean being as superficially nice to each other as possible whilst glossing over our differences with the minimum of fuss, no matter how great the temptation in our busy church communities. Nor does it mean hounding ourselves with guilt when we cannot forgive someone who has hurt us. It means having the honesty to face the brokenness of the moment, acknowledging both the pain we suffer and the pain we inflict, and placing the situation in God's hands. It is for God to forgive where we cannot; it is for Jesus to absorb the pain and injustice of the situation into his broken body, as with open hearts we break bread and recall his sacrifice. Our task, over and over again, is to place ourselves back into God's hands, recognising that we cannot resolve every situation or fix every relationship; recognising our own dependence on God's forgiveness as we muddle along in all own our too-human fallibility.

Father forgive us for we do not know what we do. Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom. Amen.

28th November: First Sunday of Advent

Guard Against Presumption

Matthew 24:36-44

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The Gospel set down for Advent Sunday (Matthew 24:36-44) is a good example of how God doesn't work. If you want to know what God doesn't do, then take this morning's Gospel literally. It is not the message Advent Sunday is intended to bring.

Matthew's account of the coming of the Son of Man (24:36-44) is about rejection. It's littered with terrible warnings. It paints a picture of a menacing, graceless God coming with devastating power to judge, and without compunction to distinguish between those who are to be saved, and those who are not.

There will be no warning. No-one, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son, will know the day and the hour of the Lord's coming.

Just as in the days of Noah and the great flood, the careless, the profligate, the unbelievers will perish. People will be going about their daily business, when suddenly the Lord will come; some will be saved, the rest will be discarded.

So be ready, says the writer of Matthew's gospel. Be constantly on your guard, because the Lord will come at a time you least expect, and you will be judged. If you are found wanting, you will be cast

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off, shut out, rejected by God. And what you will be shut out of is eternal life, the Kingdom of God.

How dreadful, then, to be cut out of that.

You get the feeling there's something terribly wrong about this passage. It does not square with the essential, fundamental message of Christianity. The God Matthew describes is not the Christian God.

Which leaves us with a problem. How can we possibly make sense of a passage of Scripture that describes a God who is not the Christian God?

Let's look at it like this.

Matthew has a habit of speaking in extremes, in antitheses. He's constantly using alternatives. To everything Matthew finds an opposite.

If he mentions good trees that produce good fruit, then he'll mention bad trees that produce bad fruit – fruit you can't eat.

If he describes a narrow road that leads to life, he'll also point out the wide road that leads to death.

If there's a way into the Kingdom of Heaven, then there's another way that will lead to hell and destruction.

If there's God, then there's also the devil.

If there's wheat, there's also weeds. Good fish, bad fish. Ground that bears fruit, ground that doesn't bear fruit.

Matthew saw things divided into good on one side, and bad on the other side.

The question, why would he do this?

Surely he would have seen the difficulty he had created. His alternatives become threats, and a loving God would never use threats.

The use of threats is not good news, and if it isn't good news, it can't be the gospel.

Another thing. The gospel isn't meant to cause division. It ought not to spread people apart. It's aim can never be to set up a 'them and us' scenario, for this would be to sow the seeds of antagonism, even hatred between those who regard themselves as 'in', and those who are designated as being 'out'.

St Paul writes a lot about this.

"As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be brought to life," he says (I Corinthians 15:22). Christ isn't dealing with some. He's dealing with everybody.

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw everyone to myself." (John 12:32) Not some, but everyone.

The Christian God is not a God who cuts things in half, and throws half away. He takes the whole world in his arms.

But Matthew speaks of division, us and them, wheat and tares, good soil and bad soil, good fish and bad fish.

He raises the spectre of destruction – of people not finding the way, and not reaching their proper end.

And this is not the good news.

This is not what Christianity is about. It's not about destruction. It's about salvation.

Another difficulty with writing like this is that it takes no account of how people come to faith – of why some people eventually believe, and some don't. Just as we can't argue anybody into belief, so we can't frighten or threaten anybody into belief.

To say to people nowadays, "Believe in God, or else when the Lord comes, which might be at any moment, you will be cast into hell-fire", would certainly achieve a result. It would alienate people from the idea of God forever. And this ought not be the result we should hope for.

So, assuming there was a point in writing in this aggressive, confrontational way, what could it have been?

Perhaps it was to warn us about something. Something important.

It could be the idea that we're 'all right', that we're bound to be all right, that we'll be 'in', that we don't have to have any worries at all.

Perhaps the writer of Matthew wants us to get rid of presumption, complacency, assuming things. And he wants us to get rid of that attitude so badly that he writes in a way that will shake us, stir us up, get us to take the challenge of faith seriously.

Because presumption, taking things for granted, can be deadly.

It's bad enough to take situations for granted, but to take people for granted is awful. None of us like to be taken for granted. We all want to be treated and respected as individuals, not just taken for granted.

And the thing is, God also doesn't want us to take him for granted. He wants us to notice him. And if we don't notice him, if we do take him for granted, we've missed so much.

These passages about the coming of the Lord then, they're trying to open our eyes to something. And what they want us to open our eyes to is that our relationship with God isn't our right.

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This could be what the writer is all about. He wants us to get rid of our deadly presumption, our deadly 'taking things for granted'.

Anglicans have prayed for a long time now, "We do not presume to come to this thy table, O Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercy."

It's one of the most beautiful sentences in the whole of English literature, and it expresses a sentiment that must always remain at the centre of our consciousness.

It reminds us we are never to take God for granted, and that we are always to be attentive to that which puts us in a relationship with him - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control - the nine 'fruit of the Holy Spirit'.

The threats, the spectre of rejection, hell and destruction – it's all hyperbole. It's the work of a writer who has worked himself up into a lather in his efforts to make a point, and his fevered imagination has run away with him.

But this heightened, almost irresponsible language has a serious point.

It reminds us that we must never take love for granted. We must never presume on the love of God.

The reality is that we are only here at all because of him, not because of us, and if this reality brings us up with a start from time to time, so be it, for the goodness of God will always be for us a constant source of surprise and amazement.

To this God of all goodness and kindness, be praise and glory, now and always.

Amen.

PEOPLES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD

William A. Simmons, *Peoples of the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008. £21.99. pp. 340. ISBN: 978-0-56563-877-8).

In this volume, Simmons sets out to 'bridge the gap between our world and the world of Jesus and the apostles' through an analysis of ancient documents and modern scholarship. This bridge is constructed with eighteen carefully presented chapters, each dedicated to a different social or cultural segment of the wider society under investigation. Indeed, the progression through the various strata of society does take one on an impressive journey over the sometimes murky waters of the key traits and influences of the peoples populating the Roman empire of the New Testament period. The historical factors which led to the characteristics that most typified them in this period are also presented. Through careful scholarship and analysis, these groups and the social environment in which they existed become an increasingly clear picture to the reader.

The breadth of material covered in the space of just a few hundred pages is impressive. One comes away with a basic knowledge of lifestyles ranging from emperors to slaves; from high priests and lofty philosophers to people struggling to maintain religious identity in the face of daily necessities. One of the problems in the text is an inundation of names, timelines and complex relationships, which can be overwhelming for a reader approaching the text as an introduction to the subject. However, plenty of references for further reading are provided, and each chapter has its own annotated bibliography to help guide one to clarification on specific topics.

All in all this is a clear, well-presented coverage of a subject that is sure to be of interest to students of the New Testament.

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