

Whatever happened to 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'?

I'm going to do something I vowed I would never do on Facebook and would certainly never have expected to do in a sermon.

Opening slide: Picture of puppies. Nice. Cute. Warm and fuzzy.



I wanted to start of with something nice and cute because I have some very difficult things to say today. Preachers like to be liked. We like to be complimented at the end of the service with nice remarks about the nice sermon. That's probably why many preachers, especially those who are carrying around the scars of many years of ministry tend to teach and preach on those parts of the Bible that will be met with approval from the largest number of people.

The result is a world in which Jesus has been turned into a meek and mild, almost effeminate, parody of who he really is as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We have even adopted nice sayings like 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' but is that an accurate picture of the Son of God, the one who yes, started his earthly life as a baby in a manger, but is also the creator, sustainer, ruler and judge of the world?

The commercial Christmas season is especially unhelpful for Christians who want to herald the real reason for the season - That God was reconciling the world in Christ.

In doing the process of doing that, Jesus taught a lot about things which we find unpleasant today. He talks about judgement. He talks about punishment. He talks about hell. He talks about coming back to judge the living and the dead. He warns us not to be unprepared for his return.

Friends, whether we like it or not, Jesus is coming back. And while we call the gospel 'Good News', it is incredibly bad news for those who reject Him.

This was a novel concept to me when I first heard it in my early twenties. I was in a church that seemed to focus on frightening people out of hell and appealed to our sense of self-preservation rather than helping us understand the plan and purpose of God in gathering a people for himself.

Please don't misunderstand me though, the implications of ignoring Jesus Christ are real and frightening. Jesus talked more about hell, and eternal punishment than another figure in the Bible. [\(read end of Matt 25\)](#)

However, God's purpose is not just to have a heaven full of people who escaped a potential disaster, He wants us to be in a right relationship with him in which we enjoy and celebrate His glory forever. The first question in the Westminster Shorter Confession, a document that dates back to the 17th century, asks this:

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever. X2

That is a far cry from just escaping hell or punishment. It is a proactive, relational statement that looks forward to the day when all wrongs will be put right, when injustice will cease and everything will be fully seen to be under the Lordship of Christ. It will be a day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.

Are you looking forward to that? Does that motivate you to tell people about Jesus? This advent season, are you looking forward to seeing Jesus face to face or are you too busy with preparations for Christmas dinner to give Him any serious thought?

If you would open your Bibles to page 846, you can follow along as we work our way through the outline in your pew sheet. There are three main sections in this passage from Luke's gospel. There is a **warning** about the coming of the master, a realistic appraisal of the **divisions** that are caused when people follow Jesus and finally, a **challenge** to be aware of the times in which we live.

Warning: vv 35-48

In polite cultures like ours, giving warnings is considered bad form. Sometimes warnings are treated as unwanted intrusions. "Mind your own business" we reply when someone is trying to help by alerting us to a potential trap.

In this internet age though, we don't mind sending emails to our friends to warn them of potential danger. I get so many 'warning' emails that I now refer people to one of my favourite websites: It's called 'Truth or Fiction'. If I get an email warning me that 'the government has secretly passed a bill to outlaw chocolate consumption or some such silliness, I can enter the details in a search box and it will tell me if this is a hoax or not.

However the warning that Luke's gospel gives us here is very different. It is a warning from the very lips of Jesus. Of course, all scripture is God-breathed and we must treat it all with the utmost seriousness but the thing that makes this one very interesting to me is that it flies in the face of the perception that Jesus just said 'nice' things and that people loved him for it.

It's popular to ask nowadays, 'What would Jesus do' when we are faced with a choice, but how often do we ask "What would Jesus say"?

Jesus says "Be ready". Be ready to serve because your master may return at any moment. He uses an illustration of a servant whose master has gone to a wedding banquet. The servant must be ready to open the door and serve his master when he returns. The master expects to find his servants ready.

Most of us don't know what it's like to have servants. Our culture and lifestyle is not as stratified as that of the first century. It's hard for us to understand the obligations of a servant to be ready.

Having just spent three weeks on a cruise ship though, I got quite used to having people do things for me. So much so, that on the first morning back at home I forgot to make myself and Lianne our morning cup of tea! I wasn't alert or ready to function normally back at home.

This is where our warning starts to get unpleasant. After encouraging servants to be ready for their master's return, Jesus turns to the consequences of not being ready. V 45 shows the potential for servants to misbehave in the master's absence. V 46 is even more startling. When the master returns and finds his servant unprepared, he will be *'cut to pieces and assigned a place with the unbelievers'*.

There is an accountability here that Jesus brings into sharp focus. The servant knows what he or she should do. The servant has a responsibility to the master. Not discharging that responsibility has consequences.

It's not popular to talk about punishment when talking about God. It's even less so when we talk about Jesus. God may be an angry old man in the clouds but Jesus, well, Jesus was a nice man who welcomed the little children, the marginalised, the outcasts. His only harsh words were for the religious hypocrites, right? Is that so?

Well, it appears that Jesus believes there is a direct correlation between knowledge and responsibility. Perhaps that's why the religious leaders came in for so much criticism. They should have known better.

(Spiderman movie – 'with great power comes great responsibility'. Peter Parker's uncle Ben)

v 48 contains this warning *'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked'.*

Who are the ones to whom much has been given? Who are the ones who have been entrusted with much? Of course in the immediate context, it is the disciples but I think Jesus leaves it open for the whole crowd to be included. If you back to the beginning of Ch 12, Luke tells us that a crowd of many thousands had gathered and that Jesus began to speak first to his disciples. Members of the crowd asked questions and it seems that they were included in Jesus' teaching. Certainly we see in v54 that he addresses the crowd directly.

Today however, we can't escape the conclusion that Christians in the west, yes, us English-speaking Aussies, are among the most privileged of people to have ever walked the earth when it comes to the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus.

We in Adelaide live in a city of churches. We can pick and choose one on the basis of geographical location, type and style of worship, décor, music and even shades of theological preference that we may hold.

We can walk into Christian bookshops and be amazed by the array of Christian books and resources that are available to help us grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus. We have a wealth of resources available on the internet, podcasts, sermons, music, videos and we can even attend conferences locally or by just logging on to them on our computers.

More importantly though, we live in the post-resurrection age where the promised Messiah isn't just a hope that we hold by faith but a historical reality. There is nothing more that can be revealed to us about God's plan for salvation that we don't already know.

If anyone can be classified as having been given much; it is us. Perhaps we don't experience that because, living in a polite culture and desiring to lead quiet, peaceful lives, we don't risk our relationships by talking about our religious beliefs.

The gospel however does bring division as Jesus points out from v 49.

Division: vv49-53

From v 49 Luke records some of Jesus' most puzzling words. He talks about bringing fire on the earth. He talks about bringing division, not peace. He talks about setting parents against children, even in-laws against in-laws and so-on.

But isn't this the man we call the Prince of Peace? Many Christmas cards this year will have just that written in beautiful script on the front.

How is it that the Prince of Peace could bring such angst into the world?

Commentators don't have a lot to say about this passage except that there will be consequences when Jesus returns. As I have been pondering it, I wonder if I could offer my take on the situation?

Could it be that Jesus is hinting at the revolution that is to occur when the Holy Spirit is given at Pentecost? Could he be saying that after he undergoes the baptism of his death and is resurrected, he is expecting a harvest of people who have been prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit and who will see the Spirit rest upon them like tongues of fire? The presence of God is often associated with fire and that is the image we are shown in Acts chapter two.

Thousands believed the message that day, people from all over the known world came together in a massive show of unity as the people of God. The curse of Babel had been lifted and the Good News was heard by all people.

In any case, it seems to me that in the context of being watchful, Jesus wants his followers to be going about His business. What business? Warning people about the coming judgement. We are not to be sitting around thinking "Well, Jesus has been and gone. It's nice to remember him at Christmas and get together with family and friends for a celebration but that's as far as it goes".

Why not try this over Christmas dinner as you enjoy the festivities? Ask people if they are ready to face Christ's judgement when He returns and what reward they are expecting from him?

If you do, you may understand the next verses better. Vv 52 onwards talk about family divisions which will be caused by the very nature of the name of Jesus Christ. That's why we tend to just talk about 'god' when we attempt to share our faith with people. We use a small 'g' God because

that is open to interpretation. We can be religious and yet not cause division.

But if you assert that Jesus is the only way of salvation, you have got yourself a debate. And yet, Jesus himself said in John 14:6, *'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

This is a core belief of Christians. To deny it is to deny who Jesus is and what He has done in the salvation of humanity by his sacrifice on the cross. This is deal-breaker for Christians. If there is another way to be saved, Jesus died in vain. Sadly though, I have even heard clergy who say they aren't convinced that this is true.

And so we come to our final point which is a challenge to observe what is happening around us and to act appropriately.

Challenge: vv 54-59

With the amazing growth in technology and the availability of information on demand, our society has become increasingly dependent on others to analyse what is going on around us. We have finance experts, political analysts, bloggers and of course, at the top of the tree, the weatherman or woman. As much as I like Channel Nine's weatherman, Brenton Ragless, who is a fine Christian brother, it amuses me that he is such a significant public figure. He is everywhere! And what he has to say seems to be the most important news we will hear all day because the weather will affect our activities, whether at work or play.

As a pilot, I had to study meteorology and I have to say, it was fascinating. The trouble with being a land-based creature is that we see only a fraction of what is going on in the atmosphere. Pilots, by virtue of the distances they travel and the speed at which they travel, get to see the changing patterns of wind, rain and storms in a more comprehensive way.

The science of aviation meteorology is so advanced now that pilots can accurately plan their flights knowing to within a half an hour's accuracy whether they will be affected by adverse weather during their flight. They can know accurately what the cloud amount will be and how low the cloud base will be at the destination. Even the visibility can be predicted accurately. If these are within the capability of the plane, the pilot and the equipment at the airport, the flight can be conducted with a high degree of confidence that a successful landing will be carried out.

If that is true for pilots and mariners and those who depend on the weather for their livelihood – farmers are another group who can interpret the weather signs – shouldn't Christians be able to interpret the times in which they live?

Addressing the crowd in v 54, Jesus chastises them for not being in touch with the present time. There is a fabulous word to describe that – it is the word 'zeitgeist'. It means the 'spirit of the times'. It tries to clarify the mood, the underlying forces that influence the thoughts and actions of people at a given time.

What can we say about the spiritual zeitgeist of our times?

Despite the advances in education, communication, science; despite the increase in wealth and privilege across the western world, we still see increasing godless behaviour, wars, unspeakable atrocities, greed and a wholesale disregard for God's plan for humanity.

Things are not getting better. We are constantly dismayed by the attempts of humans to remove God from the public discourse. Should that surprise us? Of course not! These are the signs of the last days. This is the cosmic zeitgeist we are in.

The main problem that presents is that of sin. It is the effect of sin that causes the evil we see in the world. That is what causes people to behave badly towards each other and Jesus picks up on that in v57 when he uses an illustration of a dispute to plead for reconciliation. Yes, there is human justice available but justice in this world is not everything. It is not the ultimate goal of our existence.

Jesus calls for reconciliation and that is the key to understanding our Bible readings today.

Friends, what I want you to take away today is that we live in a broken world that is still groaning under the effects of sin that were ushered in with Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. We know this by God's Word and by our experience of the spiritual zeitgeist around us.

Knowing this, we can make sense of what is happening but not lose hope. We know, living this side of the cross, that Jesus has won the battle against sin and death.

Jesus came to earth for the purpose of setting things right. Right with God and humanity; right between humans of all nations; and right between humanity and creation.

Christmas celebrates that monumental coming of Christ in humility as a baby to 'seek and to save what was lost'. He accomplished His task and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

We live now in a period where, by God's grace, we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to declare the Good News to all the world. There will be a time, when history as we know it, will be wrapped up and Jesus will return to claim His people as his bride. It will be a glorious day for all who have placed their faith and trust in Him.

But make no mistake, there will be consequences for those who reject Christ. And this is nothing for us to smug about. Far from it.

That is why Jesus talks about warning people of the judgement that is to come. We need to be ready for Christ's return but He also wants us to be busy telling others.

The longer it takes for Jesus to return, the greater the opportunity to rescue people from the final judgement and punishment that scripture warns us about. *In China alone there are reports of around 27,000 new believers choosing to follow Jesus daily.*

The Ezekiel reading is a sober reminder of the consequences of remaining silent. Ezekiel is commanded to speak to the people. A watchman is to be

appointed to warn of any enemy attack. If the watchman does his job, and people heed the warning, they will be saved.

If the people fail to heed the warning, the watchman will not be held responsible.

If however the watchman does not sound the warning, the blood of the people will be on the watchman's head.

This a very scary passage for all preachers and ministers of the gospel. We have a responsibility to warn people about the coming judgement when Christ returns. 'Be ready' is our message. "Accept the offer of salvation through Christ while you can."

In our era, the post-resurrection era, these Last Days, we are of course all priests who can intercede on behalf of others. Pray for your family members, work-mates, neighbours and acquaintances who do not yet know Jesus as their Lord and saviour. Look for opportunities to talk to them about Christ's return and invite them to surrender to His Lordship.

If you are to be a good friend, you would also warn them of the danger in staying separated from God for eternity. The punishment is severe.

We are not all called to be preachers or missionaries, but we are all expected to be servants of Christ, dutifully attending to His business. Although He is absent from us physically, like the Master in the story, he has given us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us, to empower us, to give us words to speak and better still, in Ephesians 2:10 we read that *'We are*

God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'

Going about the Master's business is not a chore, it is privilege and there can be no more heartwarming thing than seeing people turn to Christ and be saved for eternity.

As we saw in the opening picture, puppies are cute. They may make us smile, they warm our hearts, but a changed life that is lived to God's glory through Christ is the most blessed thing we can ever hope to witness. And all of heaven will rejoice. Why? Because, as God told Ezekiel in v11 of Chapter 33, *"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."*

Friends, I urge you, 'Be ready'. Tell your friends to be ready. Tell your neighbours to be ready. There is no greater gift than eternal life in the fellowship of God's people around the throne of Christ.

Let's pray.

Luke 12:35-59

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

Watchfulness

³⁵ 'Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. ³⁷ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will make them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. ³⁸ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he

comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak. ³⁹ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.'

⁴¹ Peter asked, 'Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?'

⁴² The Lord answered, 'Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? ⁴³ It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. ⁴⁴ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But suppose the servant says to himself, "My master is taking a long time in coming," and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. ⁴⁶ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

⁴⁷ 'The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. ⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Not peace but division

⁴⁹ 'I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

Interpreting the times

⁵⁴ He said to the crowd: 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, "It's going to rain," and it does. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, "It's going to be hot," and it is. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?

⁵⁷ 'Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way, or your adversary may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.'

EZEKIEL 33:1-11

Renewal of Ezekiel's Call as Watchman

The word of the Lord came to me: ² "Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, ³ and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, ⁴ then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head. ⁵ Since they heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, their blood will be on their own head. If they had heeded the warning, they would have saved themselves. ⁶ But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.'

⁷ "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ⁸ When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for^[a] their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

¹⁰ "Son of man, say to the Israelites, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of^[b] them. How then can we live?"' ¹¹ Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'