

**“Keeping awake” a sermon based on Matthew 24:36-44 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 1 December 2019, the first Sunday of Advent.**

As you can see in the order of service, we are about to baptise Izzi. So as I reflected on what I wanted to say this morning, I had you very much in mind Izzi. Not anything specific in your life, but you as a person in the early years of discipleship. So I wanted to say something about how discipleship develop, holding together baptism and the gospel for today, especially these three words of Jesus - “Keep awake therefore ...”. Water and waking.

One way. A classic way to wake someone up with water is to throw a bucket of cold water straight in their face or over their head. I thought of that as a mode of baptism today, but advisors raised issues. A bucket of water in the face - sudden, disrupting, sobering. It’s what Jesus does with us sometimes. When he speaks directly and disruptively. It’s as if he has to break through our everyday concerns, our eating and drinking, our marrying and giving in marriage, the patterns that can inoculate us against divine presence.

Years ago, in a conversation, someone said “Well, Kerry, as you are not a Christian ... “ It was an off-hand remark. Just a comment. But I had never heard it said so directly. A bucket of cold water right in the face. As I went back to my room, I realised at some level that it was true. I realised that I didn’t really know what it meant to follow Jesus. I had not yet committed myself to the Christian way. And that led to a choice. Izzi, you are being plunged into a life of receiving cold water on the face from time to time. Often from the ones who love you most, through whom Christ speaks to us.

Matthew wants us to know what it means to follow Jesus. He wants us to realise that every day we make choices and those choices have consequences.

When we imagine following Jesus is manageable, natural, easy, as if we can drift along, he says – “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Cold water, right in the face. Or when we forget the power of the words we use, he says – “I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned.” Cold water, right in the face. Or when Jesus becomes just another member of the

church, another book on the shelf, a troubled relative that needs to be silenced, Matthew tells the story of Jesus returning home, and Matthew says of Jesus - "And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief." Cold water, right in the face, and perhaps of every congregation.

When the Holy Spirit takes the Bible's words and speaks them to our hearts, it is like being woken up again. And not just from scripture. People whose insight and experience leads them to speak directly so we hear directly, and we are woken to refugees and asylum seekers, to colonisation and racism, to the dynamics of gender and gender based violence. Cold water, right in the face.

One writer put it like this – "Let us see if we can allow ourselves to be brought near the cold-water spigot whose splashes can chasten us into reality."

Woken up to the radical call of Christ on our lives.

A second way of being woken by water, the sound of rising waters flooding in. Jesus speaks of the days of Noah, when the flood came and swept people away. They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, in the field and grinding meal, until the day itself. They imagined life as a continuation of what they already did. It will be ok if we just carry on. But then, the flood. They weren't vigilant, attentive, prepared.

In this year of the three year rhythm of readings, we have moved from focusing on the gospel of Luke to focusing on the gospel of Matthew. We will notice through this year, that one of Matthew's major concerns is that we are ready, that we realise we have choice, and that we make good choices. He doesn't want us washed away. Which leads to our work on climate change. Many Pacific neighbours are regularly woken by the sound of rising waters. Izzi, your life will be increasingly affected by rising waters. Christ wants us to be awake to what is going on.

Christ is waking us to the consequences of the choices we make.

A third way of being woken by water, the sound of rain on an iron roof. For people whose accommodation has an iron roof, some degree of warmth and a bed, there are perhaps few more comforting sounds, in the middle of the night, than rain on an iron roof. Matthew's emphasis on us realising the choices we have, and the call to make good choices, has led some to wrongly turn Matthew into a moralistic text. As if Christianity is about trying harder or

being better or doing good. Whereas Christianity is mainly about grace, about receiving love and sharing what we receive, about living in Christ and letting Christ live through us, about being awake and responsive to the presence of Christ in our world. “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

Rain on an iron roof, especially in times of darkness, waking us to the beauty and rhythms of nature; in relationships, to how often we receive kindness and forbearance and forgiveness; in our workplaces to how often people generously share knowledge and insight; in the wider world to the wonder of the universe and the intricacy of our own bodies.

Rain on an iron roof, especially in the darkness, reminding us of the God’s grace all around us, the love of God flowing constantly towards us.

And a fourth way, being woken by the sound of waves on the shore. The sea is so close here in Dunedin, that with the right wind and an open window, we can hear its sound. It reminds us of realities that stretch beyond sight with no fixed horizon, and of the realm of God breaking into our lives and into this world. We are called to notice that inbreaking, and to seek to be part of it - “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” The promise is that the reign of God will break in decisively, and that the reign of God breaks in now. Keep awake to the reign of God breaking in now.

Barbara Brown Taylor - “Any of you who have ever tried to meditate—or even to say the Lord’s Prayer all the way through without letting your mind wander off—know how difficult this is. The present moment is just too slippery for most of us to hang on to. As hard as we try, we tend to slide off into what happened yesterday or what we have to do an hour from now, and whether our problem is preoccupation with the future or disillusionment with the past, the end result is that very few of us live our lives while they are actually happening to us. We are cut off from the present. God cannot get to us through all the layers of regret and expectation that we have swaddled ourselves in.”

- Cold water in the face, the radical call of the way of Christ.
- Rising waters rushing in, the consequences of the choices we live.
- Rain on an iron roof, even in the darkness the flow of God’s amazing love.

- An ocean breaking on the shore, the reign of Christ breaking in on our world, and we knowing it now.

Baptism ushers us into a watery existence where Christ comes in all these ways, and more, keeping us awake.

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