

No matter how well you plan, no matter how much you've prepared, no matter how carefully you've read the runes, consulted the cards, tested the tea leaves and studied the entrails; if you've painstakingly compiled the checklist, scrutinised each item and gone over it all several times with a fine tooth comb, no matter how you prepare, it never comes when you're expecting it; it never happens when you're prepared and ready, you'll always be found caught napping and with a permanent expression of surprise on your face. The doorbell will always ring just when you've got into the bath, when your are loins ungirded halfway through getting changed or when the pot on the stove has just reached the critical stir continuously point.

Weeks, months– years even– for us to get ready and with all the best intentions in the world and then some we inevitably find that instead of facing fate with the Zen calm of our fantasies, events always find us, to inappropriately quote Kingsley Amis “putting a new ribbon in the typewriter to the accompaniment of a ringing telephone, a waiting taxi and a full bladder.” No surprise really that mere weeks away from the ‘leave the EU’ deadline and chaos reigns supreme in the corridors of power. Cut the politicians some slack: they're just doing what comes best to humans. ballsing up their best laid plans.

It's not always incompetence, it's not always carelessness, it's just the way it is. You know this is true. You've been waiting in all day for a parcel to be delivered. You know that within the five minutes when you've decided to chance it and rushed down to the corner shop to get a pint of milk because you've run out milk and you really can't spend all day waiting without a a cup of tea- within that briefest of windows is when the delivery attempt will be made. And you've missed them and they won't be back for days though right now if you head down to the ASDA car park you might find them with the van doors open offering anyone interested a tenner for a lucky dip. It's just the way it is.

If you never use mail order or go shopping online, worry not, you too can still be part of this shared cultural experience: you'll still have had the days when the plumber is coming to fix your boiler and will arrive between 8 and 12 - sorry we can't be more specific- and because every other time they've given you this ETA they arrive at 11:59 precisely, you're still in your jimjams with pop tart smeared round your mouth and toothpaste down your front when the doorbell rings at five to eight.

Despite, it seems, our best attempts to control the world, our lives or even just the schedule of events for one damned morning, somehow we always conspire to be caught off guard.

But actually, despite appearing to be the case that we are always captive to capricious chance and that Lady Luck always neatly sidesteps the best laid plans of mice and men it is possible to maximise our chances of getting it right, but to do so takes some effort: we really need to concentrate and to focus, skills which for some reason are rarely to be found at the top of of our mental toolbox.

It's quite possible to make bad preparations- like hiring a ferry firm with no ships- and its also possible to get the wrong end of the stick and make the right preparations for the wrong thing. So if anybody actually knew what Brexit means, we might have had a chance to be ready: if we knew that the plumber was likely to be with us first, we'd have made the effort to get up a bit earlier. But we didn't know so we made a lazy guesstimate, and the consequences are always the same. So, it helps to focus, and it really helps to know what you have to do, so that you can be ready to do it when the time comes.

Now, let me just imitate fickle fate and take us off at a complete tangent for a moment, and give you a question to consider. What do you think is the most difficult thing about being a Christian? (apart from having to listen to me bleat on most Sundays). Is it having to get up early on a Sunday morning and drag yourself to church? Is it the other people when you get to the church who insist on sitting right in front of your pew, week in, week out? Is it the likelihood that many of your friends and colleagues think you're a bit weird, if that is you've actually told them what you do at the weekend? Is it the fact that scientists think you believe in fairy tales and everybody else- who believe in different fairy tales- think you're a bigot? Might it be, despite Jesus saying that his yoke is easy and his burden light, some of his teachings? It's no easy thing to love your neighbour never mind your enemy, turning the other cheek or going the extra mile takes a real effort of willpower. Maybe not coveting your neighbour's wife is beyond your capacity. There's some tough stuff there from Mr Easy Yoke, but none are more difficult, more against the very grain of our nature than, more taxing and demanding than the seemingly straightforward command: 'be ready.'

Needing to be ready is a major part of Jesus' teaching. Sometimes that teaching is direct:

*'You... must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour'*

Sometimes it's painted in the garish colours of the parables: the wise and foolish bridesmaids, the guest at the wedding banquet, the slaves drinking and debauching, the strong man's house, the house built on sand, the room swept clean. Jesus exhorts, demands, pleads with us to be ready when he comes. A lot of effort has gone into us getting that message. Be ready.

The question is, erm, how?

What is it that we need to do, what steps do we need to take, what actions are necessary for us to undertake in order for us to be ready as Jesus requires? It's not like any of us have any experience of the second coming to go on.

Here's something about being ready that might be a surprise, a shock even. It's not about you, personally. Despite two millennia of Christian teaching, it's not actually about getting us- as individuals- ready for the big day. It's not about getting ourselves personally holy enough so that Jesus won't wrinkle his nose when he finally meets us. It's not an exhortation to keep ourselves personally clean in order to be worthy to be numbered among the saints. If it was, we'd be well and truly stuffed.

It's not all about our personal piety. It's so much more about the way we change the world.

The big clue to all this is what is known in churchy circles as the proclamation of the Kingdom. That's when Jesus first announces to the world what he is and what he's about. [We were there in our Gospel reading this morning.]

And what Jesus says is:

*he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

Good news to the poor. Release to the captives. Freedom for the oppressed. Proclaim the jubilee.

It's about changing the world. It's not really about individual salvation.

And it's not just that time, that place. Whenever people come to Jesus to ask what they must do to be ready for the Kingdom, they're not told to go away, say their prayers and keep themselves pure. They are told to sell everything they own and give the money to the poor, they are told to imitate the example of the Good Samaritan, they are told to do unto others as they would have them do to them, they are told to practice practical compassion, to change the way they relate to other people: in a nutshell, to change the world.

*“Go and learn what this means,”* Jesus said *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”*

So when Jesus tells us to be ready for him, that is how he is expecting us to be doing it. Of course, we need to be saying our prayers, reading the Scriptures, learning about God, worshipping in community. But more to the point, he wants to see us working to end poverty and oppression, to bring release to the captives, justice to those treated unfairly, welcome to strangers. Like him we must be sitting down as equals with the despised and the rejected, like the Good Samaritan we must be binding up the wounds of the world.

As individuals, for sure, we have very little power to change the world. But Jesus is not asking us to act as individuals. He's asking us to act together. The whole *is* more than the sum of the parts, and in this case that whole is the Body of Christ.

How can we be ready for Christ? By changing the world. We can do it. Yes, we can. Be ready.