

Jesus is coming again. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 5 September 2012.

As you know, week by week we are considering what it is that we – the Christians at Bethesda – believe. This morning the title of my talk is 'That the Lord Jesus will come again'. And my Bible reading today consists of our Lord's well-known words at the beginning of John 14.

'Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions ('many dwelling places'); if it were not so, I would have told you. For I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also'.

These are, as I said, our Lord's own words. And yet I have to confess to you that, if I have a problem with our Lord's promise that He will one day return, it lies, not in my grasping the subject, but in letting the subject grasp me.

For, in my world of modern technology – of cars and planes – of computers, mobile phones and ipads, the expectation that the Lord Jesus, who some 2,000 years ago came into this world and who died for me at Golgotha ... the expectation that this same Lord Jesus is to come again can often seem so unreal. May God help each of us to take seriously His promise this morning ... His promise, 'I will come again and receive you to myself'. And I shouldn't like to guess how many tears those few, simple words have dried!

But, as I quoted, He began by referring to the disciples heart being troubled. And there certainly was much to cause them anxiety and alarm at that moment. Judas Iscariot had just left the room on his errand to betray the Saviour to the Jewish authorities. And no sooner had Judas left the room than Jesus broke the news to His disciples – not only that He was shortly to leave them, but that, as He said, 'Where I go, you cannot follow me now'.

His announcement came as a bombshell, throwing the disciples' minds into utter turmoil. For over three years, their whole world had been wrapped up with Him, and they were devastated at the prospect of His imminent departure.

From then on, He told them, they were to believe in Him – even as, until then, they had believed in God. That is, from then on, they would need to have the same kind of faith and trust in Him – when He could no longer be seen or touched – as, being good Jews, they already had in the God they had never seen or touched.

And then – quite possibly with a distant look in His eyes – He spoke to them of 'My Father's house' – promising them that, at some time, they would indeed be able to join Him there. And this 'because', as He explained, by His very 'going' – through His death, resurrection and ascension – He would 'prepare' (He would 'secure') a place for them there.

When speaking of 'preparing a place' for them, our Lord may well have had in mind the resting places which were stationed along key roads in the East, at which a traveller would stop to be refreshed on his journey – and which were known by the very word which the Lord Jesus used – 'mansions' or 'dwelling-places'.¹ In such cases, a messenger would often go in advance to prepare the particular dwelling-place, that the traveller on his arrival would find comfort as well as shelter there. Indeed, we read elsewhere in the Gospels that, when the time was come, He set His face to go to Jerusalem, and that He 'sent messengers before His face. And *going*, they entered a village of the Samaritans *to prepare* for Him'² – where the words 'going' and 'prepare' are exactly the same as our Lord used when speaking now to His disciples, 'I *go to prepare* a place for you'.

Having prepared the 'abiding-place', the Eastern messenger would then return – to escort and bring the weary traveller to the place which he – the messenger – had prepared. And, quite possibly with this in mind, the Saviour promised His disciples, 'I will come again' – but then added something which no Eastern messenger would have ever said, 'and receive you to myself; that where I am, you may be also'. For, ultimately, the believer's happy hope is not so much to gain admission to some 'dwelling-place' in the Father's house – wonderful though that will be – as to be with the Lord Jesus – to be 'where I am', as He said.

This past Lord's day marked exactly 67 years since, on the 2nd of September 1945, General Douglas MacArthur officially accepted, in Tokyo Bay, the Japanese surrender, which brought World War II to its close.³

Three and a half years earlier, back in March 1942, General MacArthur and his troops had been compelled to leave the island fortress of COR-EG-IDOR (Corregidor) in the Philippines, because three months before that, on the day following the attack at Pearl Harbour, the Japanese had invaded the Philippines. COR-EG-IDOR was the last island to fall, and, just before it did, MacArthur was told to break through the Japanese blockade and to get to Australia.

When the General arrived at Adelaide on his way to Melbourne, he found a large crowd waiting for him. He spoke a few words to them, which he had quickly managed to scribble on the back of an envelope: 'The President of America (Franklin Roosevelt at the time) ordered me to proceed from COR-EG-IDOR to Australia for the purpose, as I understand it, of organising the American offensive against Japan – a primary object of which is the relief of the

Philippines. I came through and *I shall return*'. This was the solemn pledge given by Douglas MacArthur to the people of the Philippines in March 1942 ... 'I shall return'.

And some two and a half years later, he did just that.⁴ Landing at the island of LAYTEE (Leyte), to the background of gunfire, the General announced, 'People of the Philippines, *I have returned*'. He had fulfilled his promise, and, following some fierce fighting, the Japanese were defeated and the islands retaken.

But Douglas MacArthur's words remind me of the solemn pledge – of the firm promise – of One who is infinitely greater than any number of 5-Star American Generals – of the words of our Lord Jesus Himself, which I have quoted more than once, 'I will come again'.

MacArthur's promise, 'I shall return', certainly counted for a lot. He later commented, 'It lit a flame that focused the nation's will. It was scraped on the sand of the beaches, it was daubed on the walls of the houses, it was stamped on the mail, it was whispered in the cloisters of the church. It became the battle-cry of a great underground swell that no Japanese bayonet could still' – end quote. Throughout the war, American submarines supplied Filipino guerrillas with cartons of buttons, packets of gum and boxes of matches, all bearing his message, 'I shall return'. This promise kept their hope alive.⁵

May our short talk this morning help to keep ours – who trust in the Lord Jesus for our salvation – alive too.

We do not know when our Lord will return. It might not be for many years ... even many decades or centuries ... but it might be today! But, although we do not know *when* He will come, we know *that* He will come – for we have His promise to that effect – and we know what will happen when He does come. And this for the simple reason that God – who knows the end from the beginning – has revealed it to us in His word. I close by reading words written by the apostle Paul ...

'This we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep (a lovely expression describing Christians who have died). For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven ... and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words'.⁶

'Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect'.

Footnotes

¹ See C. K. Barrett, 'John', page 381, and William Temple, 'Readings in St. John's Gospel', pages 218-219.

² Luke 9. 52.

³ His last remarks as the war officially ended were simple: 'These proceedings are closed'. See the video of the event at ...

<http://link.history.com/services/link/bcpid1681694255/bclid1716440957/bctid1670024879>

⁴ On 20 October 1944.

⁵ Grateful to MacArthur, the Philippine government in Manilla directed their armies to begin a tradition of calling out his name at every parade roll-call. Every company designated an officer to respond, 'Present in spirit'. It was a symbolic gesture to inspire dedication and courage in the men present. But for us there is no symbolic gesture; our Lord really is present by His Spirit. 'I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you', John 14. 18.

⁶ 1 Thess. 4. 15-18.