

Yes, Sargeant Major, I'm Awake

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We say this Sunday by Sunday, and I often wonder whether we feel that this is just some sort of mumbo jumbo put together by the early church fathers which we feel we have to keep in for traditional and historical reasons.

I have said before that I don't think like that. I think that it is true and that Jesus will return.

Why do I say that? Well mainly because Jesus said so. In our Gospel, for example we have: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven"

The night before His crucifixion, Jesus told His apostles that He would return (John 14:3). When Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels appeared to His followers, saying that He would return in the same manner as they had seen Him go (Acts 1:11)

In fact, in the whole of the New Testament refers to the return of Jesus more than 300 times. It was a key piece which completed the jigsaw of Jesus. The pieces were: The Incarnation, The Life and teaching, Last Supper, Arrest and trial and crucifixion, the resurrection and the subsequent appearances, and the ascension. If you stop there, a piece is missing, and it is the parousia, the Second Coming - the Return of Jesus.

You may have me say all this before - but I think it bears repeating.

So, let's accept that the return of our Lord is a fact. The reason that so many Christian people have difficulty with it, is that it has been 2,000 years. If it hasn't happened by now, when will it happen, for goodness sake. But as we read in 2 Peter - 1,000 years in your sight are but a day. The writer actually he nicked that from Psalm 90, but never mind. We have always known that

God's time-frame is not ours. So, we have waited 2,000 years for the return of the Lord, and it seems so so long to us. But to God, just a couple of days.

We are really not good at waiting are we. Nor are we good at keeping alert. I remember the first time I did a stag on night guard. The 8 - 10 patrol was fine, but the 2 - 4 was agony. The eyelids were all gritty and all I wanted to do was to crawl away somewhere and sleep. Or the time when I was on battle camp and we had dug our slit trenches on the sides of the Brecon beacons. We had marched over 30 miles and we were tired. But we were told to expect an attack at any time. Have you any idea how difficult it is to keep on *qui vive* when you are really tired - even when your future career hangs on it?

And this keeping alert. When there are terrorist incidents the alert level goes up, and you have to control access to government buildings very tightly. Looking under vehicles, checking in boots and under bonnets - all that sort of stuff. But it all too quickly turns into a routine. And the constant repetition of tasks makes them somehow less important. The only way that you can keep a high anti-terror alert is in short periods of heightened activity.

So what about keeping a look out for the King of Kings. It has been two thousand years. How on earth are we to maintain a high level of watchfulness, and preparedness?

When you have a particular date - like when Mother in Law is coming, or you have to prepare for the visit of Royalty to your barracks - and let's face it, the two events are very similar - well you can belt round cleaning and polishing and hiding away all the stuff that you really don't want on display. There is an end date - a time by which you try to be ready. But when you get a son like one I heard of recently who loved his parents very much, but would never tell them when he was going to visit. He might ring on the morning and say that he would call round for lunch **today**. That is very cruel really. Poor Mum and Dad had then to zoom about getting provisions in at the last minute.

Not knowing is the most difficult thing to cope with. The realisation that one is to be hanged in the morning concentrates the mind wonderfully. So said Samuel Johnson. But to live every day wondering if today is the day that the

Lord will come - it is so hard. A chum of mine was told at a routine check up for something, that they had found a brain aneurism that could kill him at any moment. Doing anything - a sudden shake of the head, jumping up and down, playing cricket - anything might see him off. He thought about it for a while. "How long have I had it?" He asked. "Oh, since childhood probably." "Well then, I shall carry on as before!"

So what are we to do? Well Malachi gives us a clue: But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver,

That's all we ever hear isn't it. The terrible judge, burning off all the dross, and so often we think of ourselves, our shabby morals and devious dealings, as so much dross when we compare ourselves with the most puissant judge.

But there is more isn't there? he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

If we turn back to God, if we are truly contrite and ask for His help as we seek to do our own purifying, then the sacrifice of our worship and our lives will be pleasing to God - as pleasing as it was at the start of creation, before the Fall. He saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good.

If we can live really using the motto "the utmost for the Highest" then we do not need to worry about our alert status. We shall be ready. Yes, but what about Paul going on about all our righteousness, all our good deeds, our very best deeds, being so much dross, so much garbage? What can we say about that?

Well, in my Free Church days people used to claim that they knew they were saved, and various stories illustrated the nature of this salvation. For example:

During the American Revolutionary War there lived in Pennsylvania a pastor by the name of Peter Miller. Although Miller was greatly loved by everyone in the community, there was one man who lived near the church who hated him and had earned an unenviable reputation for his abuse of the minister. This man was not only a hater of the church, but it also turned out that he was a traitor to his country, and was convicted of treason and sentenced to death.

he trial was conducted in Philadelphia, and no sooner did Pastor Miller hear of it than he set out on foot to visit General Washington and interceded for the man's life. But Washington told him, "I'm sorry that I cannot grant your request for your friend."

"Friend!" Miller cried. "Why, that man is the worst enemy I have in the world!"

"What?" the general exclaimed in surprise. "Have you walked sixty miles to save the life of an enemy? That, in my judgment, puts the matter in a different light. I will grant him a pardon for your sake."

The pardon was made out and signed by General Washington, and Miller proceeded at once on foot to a place fifteen miles distant where the execution was scheduled to take place that afternoon. He arrived just as the man was being carried to the scaffold, and when he saw Miller hurrying toward the place, remarked, "There is old Peter Miller. He has walked all the way from Ephrata to have his revenge gratified today by seeing me hung." But scarcely had he spoken the words when Miller pushed his way through to the condemned man and handed him the pardon that saved his life.

In the last discourse in the Upper Room Jesus says this: ¹⁸"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." and again⁶"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is

from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

And earlier in John: My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: ²⁸ And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, which gave *them* me, is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and *my* Father are one.

Take courage. You and I are those sheep. Our place with the Lord is assured. Jesus said so.

So being alert does not mean going about in a state of terror all the time. Our salvation is assured. But that does NOT mean that we can slop about and not live lives worthy of him. What it does mean is that we do not need to be eaten up inside with fear, and lose all that energy in constant worry. Having Jesus' express assurance that we are His, means that we can simply get on with life, like my friend with his dangerous blood vessel. Put it behind you and live a life that is pleasing to God.

And if nothing else registers, then hear the words of the Lord God to each one of us. Fear not. I have called you by name. You are mine.