

Homily for Advent 1C, 2021

Luke 21:25-36

'Keeping our heads up'

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INTRODUCTION

'...stand up and raise your heads...'

We all know how significant body language and posture is, don't we?

When I arrive home,

I can get a fairly good idea of what sort of day it's been when I see the body language of my children.

Sometimes there's a spring in their step,
heads lifted high,
running towards me.

It's been a good day,
there's **joy** there.

Other times,
shoulders are hunched over,
faces are turned to the ground.

Something has gone wrong,
There's apprehension there.

Our Lord Jesus Christ will come again,
To judge the living and the dead.

So how will **you** meet him?

What is our posture to be when he returns?

Will it be one of fear and dread,
is it a time for cowering and hiding?

Or will you, can you,
meet him in confidence,
in hope,
in joy?

Let's think today about...

The posture of hope,
The posture of heavy hearts,
And the posture of prayer.

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THE POSTURE OF HOPE

The text begins with some signs that Jesus says will accompany his appearing.

And it's fairly dramatic sort of stuff.

*'Signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,
roaring of the seas and the waves...
the powers of the heavens will be shaken.'* (v 25,26).

The final appearing of Jesus Christ is an event of such magnitude,
that the whole created order is disrupted.

When God created the world he brought order from the chaos,

as Christ appears again it's almost as if the creation is coming unstuck,
this is a truly earth-shattering event.

But even for all that,
the focus here isn't so much on the signs themselves,
but on the **effect** of those signs.

Four words are used here for the **effects** of these signs on the people and nations of the earth.

There will be **distress**,

there will be **confusion**,
people will faint from **fear**,
there will be **foreboding**.

Which is often how people experience life in this world in general,
Perhaps it's what your life feels like at times?

For the people of this world apart from Christ,
his return is not one that is met with confidence,

Instead,
it's characterized by fear,
it's the sort of stuff that makes you want to run and hide.

Which isn't surprising given what Jesus has just described about the cataclysmic cosmic signs.

What **is** surprising,
is that when Jesus turns his attention to his disciples,
when he turns his attention to you dear Christians,

he describes a completely different way to meet Christ,
a completely different posture.

*'Now when all these things begin to take place,
stand up and raise your heads,
because your redemption is drawing near'.*

Do you remember your parents telling you to sit up straight,
stand up straight,
keep your chin up,
this sort of thing.

I remember the constant refrain from my football coaches when the team was getting beaten,
no matter what is happening they would say,
*'keep you head up,
keep your head up'.*

Because to stand up straight with heads lifted high is the posture of confidence,

of hope,
of expectation,
of joy.

That is how you as a child of God can meet Christ when he returns.

It's not to be a day of fear,
it's not to be a day of dread,
it's something we look forward to with joy.

Why?

*'Because, Jesus says, your **redemption** is drawing near'.*

There are these two ways of meeting Christ.

One is in fear,
the other is with the joy.

One is in distress,
the other is with hope.

But what is it that marks these two groups out?

It's not anything intrinsic in themselves,

It's not that one group is inherently more worthy than the other.

The focus here isn't even that one group is morally superior to the other,

Even though we were reminded in last week's Gospel reading and sermon that doing good and evil is a part of the final judgment.

The big difference Jesus talks about here that changes your posture at the end,
Is whether you know the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus,
and or whether you don't.

Why can you meet Christ when he comes in confident hope and joy?

It's because the same Jesus who will come again in glory,

is the one who first came in the flesh,
was born into our broken world,
and went to the cross to die for you.

He did this to *redeem* you,
that is to pay the price of his holy and precious blood,
so that you would belong to him.

Jesus has rescued you from more than just a bad posture.

In fact, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,
not just hunched over,
flat on your back dead,

and he has made you alive again,
stood you up on your two feet,
so that you can stand confidently before him.

Luther even saw in this little picture of the fig tree another pointer to the fact that this is to
be a day of hope and joy for us.

Jesus didn't give us a depressing picture of a dreary winter,
but of summer,
is a picture of hope and joy.

It just so happens this matches nicely with the time of year we're in here in Australia.

I don't know about the fig trees,
But the Jacarandas are certainly flowering,
And many other trees,

And Jesus is saying when you look and see the trees changing from winter to spring to
summer,

It can remind you of the coming of your Redeemer.

So keep your head up.

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THE POSTURE OF HEAVY HEARTS

That's the posture of *hope*,
But then there's the posture of *heavy hearts*.

Heads and shoulders which are hunched over when he returns,
begin with hearts which have been weighed down in this life.

He says to 'be on guard' against your hearts being 'weighed down' (v 34).

We still use this expression don't we?
To have 'heavy hearts'.

And it's true,
we all know don't we,
that there are things in life which weigh on our hearts,

I wonder what it is for you?

What is it that weighs on your heart this day?

Here Jesus is especially speaking of heavy hearts in the sense of a gradual weariness of the soul,
a spiritual tiredness.

And it's very interesting to hear what he focuses on as those things to be on guard against which can weigh us down spiritually:
'Dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life'. (v 34).

A modern paraphrase of the Bible gives this sentence as,
'don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties, drinking and shopping'.
(*Message*)

That's actually not a bad modern application of what Jesus is getting at here, I think.

There are certain activities in life which gradually dull our faith,
weigh our hearts down,
it's good to be aware of these things.

You may remember that earlier in this section of teaching,

Jesus has another warning,

He says beware that when dramatic events take in the world,
That you are not deceived and lead astray.

In that case the problem is that we get too carried away.

There's something like a spiritual panic that takes hold and makes us vulnerable to people
who can lead us down false paths.

But here it's almost the opposite problem.

It's complacency.

And the threat isn't out there,
But it's in here.

In the Lutheran Church when there have been times when God has been at work in
powerful ways bringing large numbers of people to repentance and faith,

The old Lutherans didn't usually talk about *revival*,
But they spoke of awakening.

That's what we need in the church.

We're not necessarily spiritually dead,
But we are spiritually drowsy.

This should be our prayer for Bethlehem,
For the Lutheran Church of Australia,
For Christ's whole church in our land,

That he awakens us from our spiritual slumber!

Especially in light of the coming of Christ.

And isn't this an important caution for us to hear on November 30 when we're about to
enter December!

That parties, drinking and shopping will dull our spiritual expectation.

What else is December for many people but parties, drinking and shopping!

Now don't hear me wrong,
there's nothing wrong with those things in themselves.

I enjoy all these things,
(Except for shopping).

But Jesus is saying,
just be a bit careful with these the excess of these things.

Because you'll find that the more you get drawn into them,
it's as if your heart will begin to settle more here on earth,
rather than being drawn to heaven.

Pretty soon you'll find yourself nodding off in your spiritual life,
so that the day of his return ends up catching you out unexpectedly.

Jesus teaching here echoes his parable of the sower,
particularly the seed that falls among the thorns,
where Jesus says *'as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.'*

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THE POSTURE OF PRAYER

So there's the posture of hope,
The posture of heavy hearts,
Then finally there's the posture of **prayer**.

Jesus says,
'Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

Be alert there could also be 'stay awake'.

The image is almost like being on night shift.

Some of you I know have worked nights,
Which takes some getting used to.

The posture we are to adopt in this life is one of vigilance,
like a guard on sentry duty,
keeping alert and awake as people of prayer.

It's so simple,
Yet so profound.

Regular habits of prayer will keep you spiritually sharp,

As you let your life of prayer slip,
You will become spiritually dulled.

Of course, lest we think we can do this by our own strength,

We need to remember that no sooner has Jesus given this instruction,
than the disciples undergo a first little test in the garden of Gethsemane.

Forget a whole lifetime of staying awake and praying,
how about just a few minutes?

They fail,
as we all do in this life of watchful vigilance and prayer.

Thank God there is one who does not fail.

Jesus was the one who stayed awake and prayed in the garden that the Father's will be done,
And Jesus was the one who said he was praying for Peter that his faith may not fail.

Jesus is the one who is still at the Father's right hand praying for you.

Just ponder that,
the very same one who is coming again in power and glory,
and who calls you to stay awake and pray,
this same Jesus himself neither slumbers nor sleeps,
and prays for you.

So that,
in him, and by his strength,
you can keep awake and learn to pray,
so that you can stand before the Son of Man.

And is there any other practical help we have in this?

Well, to go back to those football coaches of mine who used to tell me to keep my head up on the field.

What's amazing is how this dynamic can work on a team.

When a team is getting beaten and losing hope you can see the heads dropping one by one,
The despair spreads.

It's much easier to keep your head up and have hope when you're doing it together with a team.

Well,
Our life of cultivating spiritual vigilance isn't done alone,

It happens in the life of the Church.

We keep awake and pray by gathering and joining together in the praying and worshipping community.

Night shift on your own is brutal,
but if you're with others it's much easier to stay awake.

The Christian church is a sort of perpetual, communal night shift,
where together we draw strength from our Lord.

As a pastor Sunday by Sunday I look out and see many heads and faces,

The body language and posture of the people of God speaks a lot.

On any given Sunday I can tell that some of you are joyful, confident and full of life,
While others are anxious, fearful,
And carrying heavy burdens.

As we confess our sins many heads are down,
Not necessarily in fear,
But in reverence,
In repentance,
Yes in sorrow over sin.

But as I'm privileged to speak Christ's word of absolution,
What it is to see those heads raised up.

We may come into God's presence carrying the cares and anxieties of this world which
'weigh our hearts down',

But we are forgiven and welcomed by our redeemer,
and as we prepare to receive his body and blood,

what do we sing:
'lift up your... **hearts'**.

Lifted heads at Christ's return,
come from lifted hearts now in his presence.

Because here the Christ who came and who will come again,
continually comes to you,
bringing his redemption in water and word,
bread and wine,
keeping you awake until he comes again.

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CONCLUSION

Posture is important, isn't it?

I still find myself saying to my children things I heard when I was young,

Stand up straight,
And keep your head up.

It's important to face life with confidence,

With your head held high.

But even more important for you to know is that when your Lord Jesus Christ comes again in power and glory,
you do not need to cower in fear,
but you can stand up,
you can raise your head,
because your redemption draws near.

In the meantime,

Don't let your hearts get weighed down,

Let's be alert and awake,
and pray.

Let's keep our heads up.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.