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## Introduction

Themes of anticipation, preparation and recognition run through all the Gospel readings to which we traditionally turn our attention during the season of Advent. They are also always coupled with the imperative for a response and accounts of the different forms this might take. In the readings we follow this Advent, Matthew chooses to emphasise preparation and response – but at various points he also weaves different paradoxes into his narrative which throw into sharp relief the true nature of both King and Kingdom whose coming we look for in this season. Today's reading certainly introduces various questions about anticipation and preparation but it also points us, less directly towards a particular dynamic which may come into play when hopes and expectations are disappointed and when what we long for seems deliberately thwarted by the actions of others. As we begin our three year cycle of reading the Gospel, and through it the world, using the lens of a spirituality of conflict, this seems a very appropriate place to begin.

## Anchor Question

Think about an event which you were eagerly anticipating – but which did not turn out as you expected. What emotions were predominant? How do those emotions influence your recollections? How did they affect your responses to the situation at the time?

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## Text

### Matthew 24:36–44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

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Traditionally reflections on this text tend to focus on the nature of awareness and watchfulness and the importance of appropriate preparation; or perhaps on how we can hold the balance between being prepared for a future event and 'getting on with other things' while we wait for it. However the reading also points us towards a huge paradox – but it is not one which Matthew intentionally introduces; rather it is one which is built into the tonal progression of his gospel itself: A narrative whose opening announces a great theology of inclusion – outsiders, the questionable and the downright scandalous are key figures in the genealogy of Jesus – progresses towards one in which the leitmotif becomes one of exclusivity. Similarly the warm, expansive and generous feel contained in the Gospel's first discourse – the famous 'Sermon on the Mount' – stands in stark contrast to its final discourse, from which today's passage comes, with its woes, vituperative language and warnings of apocalyptic judgement and destruction.

If we look at the audiences to which the 5 discourses are addressed we can trace out what seems to be a parallel shift: the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-7:29) is offered to all, the second discourse (10:5-42) is given to the disciples and initiates the proclamation and establishment of the Kingdom; the parables of the third (13: 1-52) begin to articulate a narrative of inclusion/exclusion – those who do and don't belong to that Kingdom (and again there is a shift from the crowds to the disciples); the fourth discourse (18:1-35) seems to be exclusively directed towards the nascent Kingdom community – with instructions as to how to remain within it; and the final discourse (24: 1-25:46) — with its strong and difficult language – is directed against its enemies, those who are opposing it.

What we have then is a sense of the escalating conflict underpinning and shaping the purpose of Matthew's narrative. If we look at this in its historical context we can perhaps begin to see where this might be coming from. Matthew's gospel was written primarily for Jewish Christians and scholarly opinion dates it, for various reasons, as some time after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. This cataclysmic event meant that Judaism could no longer be a temple-centred, sacrificially enacted religion and had to find a new form. However – as is clear from the course of history – it did not find that shape through the newly established and developing vision of the Kingdom of God articulated by Jesus. So it may well be that what we see reflected in the changing keys of Matthew's narrative is a reflection of the author's own disappointed hopes and his frustration and anger that something which had never been intended as an alternative to Judaism, or to exclude its adherents, had been forced into a position of conflict with it.

The chilling narrowing of this gospel's emotional key from generosity to condemnation, and the changing narrative dynamic from openness to exclusion are a stark example of what can happen when we let the hurt, anger or frustration of a situation overpower the love, compassion, and hopefulness which are the hallmarks of the life of the Kingdom. Hospitality changes into hostility; generosity is replaced by judgment and the Other becomes an enemy to be resisted rather than a guest to be welcomed. It alerts us to the fact that one of the key dynamics in situations of conflict, is a progressive narrowing – in various different ways – of the spaces we inhabit, and thus a restriction of the degrees of freedom within which we can operate. The end result is to close down the possibilities for creative response and drive us deeper into our own trenches.

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## Response

Reflect on a situation – either personal or related to work or church – where your attitude towards another person or group has changed. What direction has that change been in? See if you can trace that trajectory, identifying any markers of the kind discussed above and reflecting on what these tell you about this particular relational journey. Are there things you would or could change in this instance, or if you encounter a similar situation again?

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## Prayer

Leader: Jesus, forgive us  
**All: Forgive us and free us**

**Jesus our brother**  
You call us to a daily journey  
of ongoing conversion  
in our thinking, our loving and our living ...

**We recognise and confess those times**  
when fear and anxiety  
have deafened us to your call  
and imprisoned us in a barren place

*silence*

Leader: Jesus, forgive us  
**All: Forgive us and free us**

**We recognise and confess those times**  
when anger and bitterness  
have deafened us to your call  
and imprisoned us in a barren place

*silence*

Leader: Jesus, forgive us  
**All: Forgive us and free us**

**We recognise and confess those times**  
when broken relationships and dreams  
have deafened us to your call  
and imprisoned us in a barren place....

*silence*

Leader: Jesus, forgive us  
**All: Forgive us and free us**

Leader: It is for freedom that Christ has set us free -  
go and live out the freedom of God!