

WEEK 5: TUESDAY

I vividly remember my first experience of working on a building site. I was a student, earning some money during the vacation. The work was physically hard — or rather, it would have been if we had kept it up all day. There was an unwritten law that you went at your tasks as slowly as you could, pausing regularly for a rest or a 'smoke break', except when the boss showed up. Then, of course, everyone would look brisk and get on as fast as they could. The play-acting would have been comic if the deceit hadn't been so distasteful.

Clearly, from Jesus' comments about the slaves doing their jobs while the master is away, this culture of working only when someone is watching is hardly a modern invention. Jesus is addressing his close followers, warning them of a coming time when they will have to get on with their work, staying faithful to him in his absence. They will have to look after his 'household' whether they think he'll be coming back the next minute or not.

The challenge to wait, and behave appropriately, during a long time of 'delay' (verse 48) was not a new one in Jesus' day. The Jews of the previous centuries had spoken of it constantly. They encouraged one another to stay faithful to their God, and to his covenant with them expressed in the Mosaic law, while they waited for God to act, to return to them in power, to rescue them from their enemies and set up his kingdom.

Jesus has taken this well-known theme and transformed it so that it applies more directly and vividly to his own followers after his approaching death. He knows that there will come a time of vindication. But nobody except God knows when that will be (verse 36). But he also knows that those who wait patiently, and get on with their tasks of looking after God's people, will be rewarded — and that those who don't will be punished.

This is a severe warning for all Christian leaders and teachers. Sometimes people seem to suppose that it doesn't really matter how you behave, that we can keep the wheels of the church turning all right without paying too much attention to the teaching of Jesus himself or the doctrine and lifestyle taught by his first followers. That attitude is then held in place by a sneering rejection of all talk of a future judgment. Such talk, it seems, fell out of fashion some time ago, and we can keep it that way (people seem to think) by telling horror- stories about old fire-and-brimstone preachers trying to scare people into good behaviour, or even into heaven. But just because people have overstated things in one direction, that doesn't mean there isn't a danger of overstatement in the other direction. If Lent is a time of reflection, penitence and discipline for all Christians, perhaps it is especially so for those who dare to think of themselves as slaves in charge of part of Jesus' household.

TODAY

Lord, as you have called us to your service, make us mindful and worthy of our calling.