



Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday before Advent Year A

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

Matthew 25.14-30

Both our readings for this week follow directly from last week's, which is always helpful as we don't have to put them into context, we know what has just happened. Last week Paul turned his attention to the end time, to Jesus' second coming to rule God's recreated order. As I said last week, 'Paul moves on in verse 13, the beginning of our reading for today to address the topic of 'those who have died.' It was a central question especially to a persecuted community. It is such a central question in our lives; everyone has asked 'What will happen when we die?' Paul roots it in the here and now by saying that he is addressing this topic because he does not want them to grieve about those they have lost 'as others do who have no hope.'

That is the point, we do have hope. We have the promise given by Jesus that all who believe in him, all who try to live in his way, who follow his teaching will be united with him. Death is not the end; Jesus fought that conflict at Calvary. At his Resurrection he defeated death and won eternal life for us.

Last week we saw Paul turning his attention to the process of this, to how it might be accomplished. He was as I said describing the indescribable so therefore he used imagery, word pictures. Jesus does this in his parables and today we have another story, that of the talents.

Paul turns his attention now from how to when this might happen. Jesus addresses this several times for example Matthew 24.42

⁴² 'Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Paul is writing this much earlier than the gospel and he uses very similar images. He points out clearly that we simply do not know the, 'times or seasons' when Jesus will return. He speaks of the

suddenness of it being like 'a thief in the night.' The similarity between this and that gospel reference is remarkable.

The point is, Paul says, that it will happen when you least expect and the process will not be comfortable. He uses the images of the woman in labour and says it will happen as suddenly and 'there will be no escape.'

Once again these echo Jesus' words from John's gospel 16.21. Jesus has just said, 'A little while and you will not see me, again a little while and you will see me.' He is talking of his crucifixion and resurrection but that can be extended to his second coming and God's new creation.

²⁰ 'I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²² So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you... ²⁵ 'I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father.' John 16

Paul makes it clear that those who have disobeyed the law of God will not escape judgement. 'Then sudden destruction will come upon them and there will be no escape.' Jesus is the Messiah; the Messiah will come again to judge the world in God's perfected order. We do not know when or how, we just know that this is our hope and our faith. It would be foolish to play down the idea of judgement and Paul is at pains not to do so. But if we look at those words in the gospel I have just quoted, Jesus is clearly talking about persecution. These apply to all persecuted Christians but he promises, 'your pain will be turned to joy.' Just as the pains of labour turn to joy in the birth of the new child. And Jesus gives the promise that he will return again and their hearts 'will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you.'

This applies to every Christian, certainly to these new Thessalonian Christians who are facing persecution. Paul says to them that they are not 'children of darkness but of the light.' This image of darkness and light is such a central one. Think of these words from John 1

⁵ 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it....⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

Jesus is the light of the world, all who follow him walk in his light and live their lives as 'children of the light.' This is what Paul says clearly at verse 4. There is no need for them to fear because they believe in Jesus and live their lives according to his teaching. They are living out his commands in their daily lives and they are prepared to face persecution and death for their faith.

So what then are we to do? Be prepared says Paul, we do not know when the day will come, there is no need to fear, you must however be prepared. Think back to the gospel reading last week, to the foolish bridesmaids who were not prepared. I suppose we could say there is no room for complacency. That is the besetting sin with those who think they have got it right with God. Think of the Scribes and Pharisees, the Temple hierarchy, Jesus is always berating them for just this. Yes it is the first step to believe, to set up your church in Jesus' name. But, Paul is continually warning of backsliding. It is no good having a church which operates on the world's rules or selfish rules. It is not what we want but what God wants, what Jesus wants. Every Christian community

must put Jesus at the centre and follow in his way. We have all heard the saying that to be a Christian we need to 'cross out the 'I' in our lives'. The 'I' crossed out makes a cross. It might be an old saying but it is still pretty fundamental. We need to hold that at the forefront of our thinking. I have said it before but it really does amount to asking 'What would Jesus do?' before we do something. Going back to the way of Christ, in every action, is what we should all be doing. That is what St. Paul is teaching,

⁶ 'So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.'

In the next verses after today's reading he will go into this in more depth. So then what must the Thessalonian Christians do?

⁸ 'since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.'

If we think of Ephesians 6 the image is extended, they would have been very familiar with the armour of the Roman soldiers, designed to protect them in battle, so then Paul extends that to create this word picture. He is seeing this as a protection against evil in all its forms. Indeed we all have the capacity for good and evil so then he says be strong in the strength of God.

¹³ 'Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' Ephesians 6

If we look at the individual words in the image, 'truth' and 'righteousness', 'proclaim the gospel of peace', 'faith', 'salvation', 'the Spirit', 'which is the word of God' we have Jesus' teaching in a nutshell.

Paul in the passage from Thessalonians speaks of the breastplate of faith and love. We have the central Christian values, the values which are God given and we need to live out in our lives. These are the things that we must use as a guide for our lives, they are our armour in the fight against wrong.

At the end Paul makes it clear that all we who believe in Jesus, who live in this way,

⁹ '...God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.'

There Paul explains the central Christian faith concisely. Jesus died for us in love, he rose from the dead, and he won salvation for us and all who truly turn to him. Paul refers back in the last phrase to the question from last time, what about those who have died? He reiterates what he said then, the living and the dead will live again and be united with Christ,

¹¹ 'therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.'

Once again we think of last week's reading, 'Comfort one another with these words' and of the words from a Canadian Creed which I quoted last time. We, 'proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.'

It is good to read the gospel passage in the light of our epistle reading.

This week it is the parable of the talents. We get our word talents from the biblical talent. As I was writing this I thought straight away of a prayer often used in funeral services, this is how it begins,

'God our Father, we thank you that you have made each of us in your own image and given us gifts and talents with which to serve you.' We need to keep this in mind as we read the story.

It is important to recall the words which begin chapter 25,

¹ 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.'

After this Jesus tells the story of the bridesmaids, then he moves on directly to the story of the talents. So it is safe to assume that, 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this,' prefaces this story too. Jesus says at the beginning of the story, 'for it is as if...' So then Jesus is referring to the end time here just as Paul was doing in our epistle reading, especially as in the verses immediately following the parable of the talents Jesus says,

³¹ 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,'

At first sight the conclusion to the parable sounds somewhat harsh. But this is not the first time Jesus has spoken in this vein, think of the story of the wedding banquet. It is important to realise that time is short. This is chapter twenty five; chapter twenty six begins with the words, ¹ 'When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ²'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'

Jesus is on the brink of his crucifixion. People need to sit up and take notice. So what does Jesus mean in his story?

Firstly it helps to understand exactly what a talent was and how much it was worth. I didn't know so I looked it up. A talent wasn't a coin but a unit of measurement, its weight was about eighty pounds and when used as a unit of currency it was valued for that weight of silver. In monetary terms then it would be worth about 6,000 denarii. If one denarius was a labourer's daily wage then a talent would be a man's wage for sixteen years. We are not talking small change here, and the man who had five had more than enough to last a lifetime. Therefore they have been entrusted with a huge amount. Going back to the idea of our talents as gifts from God, it helps to keep this in mind. There is a lovely hymn which contains the words, 'We are but stewards of thy bounty held in solemn trust for thee.' If we remember this it is easier to understand the story. The master then is God, he gives the talents to his servants, according to their ability to use for him. These huge amounts are given in trust for a specific purpose, the servants are to use the money wisely and return it with interest to the master. Think of the parable of the sower and the seeds being the word of God, some people receive the word and yield a hundredfold, some thirty, but some seed falls by the wayside and is choked by thorns.

Those who receive the word of God in Jesus Christ, who live by it faithfully, who obey his 'great commission' given at the end of Matthew's gospel, who take his words to heart and live by them, they are the faithful stewards. Their rewards are the promises of God.

Jesus' last words to the disciples were,

¹⁹ 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' Matthew 28

Think of Paul's words to the Thessalonians, people who face horrendous challenges but still follow the Christian life. It is people like this who are fulfilling the teachings of Jesus. They have received the promises won for us in Jesus, the promises of the God who loves us. They have not wasted their 'talents' but they sow the seed and will reap the promised harvest.

But what of the man who comes in for such condemnation? We have just looked at the parable of the bridesmaids. They were not prepared for the bridegroom Jesus', the Messiah's, coming. They missed the banquet. These people were not wilful about it but this man is. He makes his mind up right from the beginning. 'I am taking that talent and digging a hole, burying it and that's it!' Well, if the talent is the word of God, no wonder Jesus is angry. Once again this man represents those people who like the Pharisees have 'hidden the light under a bushel' and they have done so wilfully.

The Jews had been given a special relationship with God, he had loved them, made covenants with them. They had his word, the law and the prophets. They had the promise that God's Messiah; the Anointed One would come to them.

What do they do? They turn the word of God into a burden, a weapon of control to hedge the people in. Turn it into a yoke which is hard to bear. They bury the word of God keeping it for themselves. They are complacent; they think they have got it right with God, which of course Jesus is at pains to point out they have not. What is worse when the master, the Messiah comes they do not even recognise him.

Jesus is the light of the world, a light they will wilfully put out – to extend the metaphor, will bury in a hole at his death. They are worthless. But to use the words of the hymn, 'The light of the world is risen again.' Jesus cannot be put down, he is God incarnate. The rulers and those who reject him cannot or will not accept that. Their behaviour, like the man in the story, is not a mistake, it is a deliberate choice. No wonder Jesus condemns them in no uncertain terms.

Jesus is nearing the crucifixion; the good servants are the ones who have accepted his word who take it into the world who sow the seeds of Christianity.

Jesus is the king whose throne is Calvary but he is also the master who will come again as judge. When the master does return, he expects us all to have lived out his words to the best of our ability not to metaphorically bury them in a hole while we go off and do our own thing. We must nurture the gifts of God as 'the pearl of great price.' Then the reward is sure, just as with the faithful servants of the parable.

That is as far really as we can take this parable. Parables are illustrations, never the complete picture. It is quite obvious that it does not give the true picture of the loving creator who loved us so much that he died for us, the God who walks with us always and supports us with his Holy Spirit. We have the promises of God. We need to be his people who walk in his light and bring the light and joy of Jesus' love to others.

I remember a head teacher of mine saying of a certain member of staff who was a Christian, 'I always feel better for having spoken to her.' May the same be said of us especially in times of trouble.

That promise, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.' is a great truth and comfort. But we know that Jesus will come at the end of the age, to judge the world at God's new creation. As people of the light we need to be stewards of his bounty held in solemn trust for him. Maybe it is good to finish with the words of the hymn, 'I cannot tell,'

'But this I know, he heals the broken hearted and stays our sin and calms our lurking fear, and lifts the burden from the heavy laden, for yet the saviour of the world is here.' William Young Fullerton.

~~~~~