



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The First Sunday of Advent Year C

**1 Thessalonians 3.9-13**

**Luke 21.25-36**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent crowns will adorn our churches and the first candle will be lit. I have said that Advent is a time of expectancy, of waiting for the arrival of our King Jesus, not only at his incarnation at Bethlehem but at his second coming when he comes to rule the earth, our readings reflect this.

There are some people who we find inspirational and who have the power to move us. People who we respect and who can give us strength. When I listen to our Queen I feel like this. Think of her first message during the pandemic, so many people told me how moved they were and how they felt strengthened just by listening to her, certainly I did. Another time was last year when she stood alone at the tomb of the unknown warrior, that photograph was so symbolic for me. I am sure many things inspire the Queen but one of the things that give her motivation and strength is her deep faith in God and her prayer life. She has often spoken of this. In times of trouble we turn to people like the Queen who inspire us.

What an inspirational figure Paul must have been. His deep faith in God, his life rooted in prayer and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit literally changed the world. It is important as we read Paul's letters to the early churches to understand a bit about what that world was like.

We need to go back, to look at Paul's missionary journey to understand the reading properly. Chapter one of Thessalonians begins,

<sup>1.1</sup>'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.'

Paul greets the Thessalonians from his co-workers for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He and Silas, (this is the Silvanus mentioned here) had been in Philippi and had preached the message there. Our reflections have dealt with passages from Paul's epistle to the Philippians. We know that both he

and Silas were arrested and treated very badly. We have the miraculous story of their night in prison and their formal release when Paul declared his Roman citizenship.

From Philippi Paul moved to Thessalonica. It is in northern Greece about two hundred miles north of Athens. Paul moved down to Athens after his time in Thessalonica and this letter was possibly written from Corinth. The Greek gods were at the centre of life; there were temples and shrines everywhere. The Romans had conquered Greece and the same was true of Roman gods. These gods were fickle, wrathful and had to be constantly appeased by the fearful worshipers. Add to that the cult of Emperor Worship, because the Emperors had declared themselves gods. Woe betides anyone who did not acknowledge this as fact.

Paul and his co-workers come to Thessalonica after their departure from Philippi having established a new community of Christians there. They come into that mixture of idol worship. They tell the Good News of the one true God, the God of love. They tell of his Son Jesus Christ, the God who took human form and died for love of humanity and of his resurrection and of Salvation, the great gift of God freely given through grace. How counter cultural is that. Those people who joined the community of believers in Thessalonica were inspired by his words and committed themselves not only to a new belief but to the new way of life demanded of followers of 'The Way.'

Paul begins his letter by saying that he is praying for these new Christians. It is so important because prayer is at the centre of Christian life and these people need his prayers and God's help. Their lives need to be rooted in prayer.

<sup>2</sup> 'We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly  
<sup>3</sup>remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'

The theme is prayer and steadfastness, he is well aware of the persecution that is bound to fall on the fledgling church. These people are human and fallible; they have accepted the good news of Jesus but they live in a hostile society, in the face of inevitable suffering and persecution will they hold fast to that faith? This is Paul's constant worry. It is because of this and his deep love for them that he sends Timothy to them again to bring news of how the church is faring.

<sup>3.1</sup> 'Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; <sup>2</sup>and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.'

I think it is important to remember that there was no way of knowing something without someone going and giving news. We are so used to push button technology and instant information; the ancient world had none of that. We can see by the first line how desperately worried Paul was for them, how he longed to know that the church was still strong and hadn't succumbed to such pressures as persecution. So Paul relied on his fellow worker Timothy. He also makes it quite clear in his letter that persecution is to be expected; indeed to follow Jesus is to expect condemnation and suffering. Jesus said, 'whoever wishes to be my follower must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.' Paul had warned them of what they must face. How easy to capitulate, to fall away under such pressures.

<sup>3</sup> 'Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. <sup>4</sup>In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. <sup>5</sup>For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.'

How delighted Paul must have been, when on his return Timothy gave positive news.

<sup>6</sup>'But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you.'

By examining chapter three we are able to put our reading for today into context and gain a better understanding. Paul himself was still being persecuted; his work was hard and difficult. He was suffering but he was doing this for his King, Jesus. He cares deeply for the churches he has founded and this news must have been wonderful for him. Paul and his fellow workers had taken the gospel to these regions and against all the odds, people had chosen to accept the message and if necessary suffer and die for the sake of the gospel. Paul knew what the power was that caused people to turn to Christ and that sustained them, it was the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

<sup>9</sup>'How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? <sup>10</sup> Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.'

Notice the central word in this; it is the word 'pray'. We cannot stress enough just how central prayer was to Paul how central it must be to the lives and worship of all Christians. He thanks God for the Spirit working in him and the churches; he prays that the Christians may be strengthened in their steadfast purpose but also in their love for one another.

<sup>11</sup>'Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. <sup>12</sup>And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.'

How central this must be to faith in Christ, to Christians in every age. It is vital that fellowship with one another in Christ is at the centre of our church life, caring for one another, helping one another, and seeing Jesus in one another. Christians must really accept the central truth that all are equal in the sight of God, that Jesus is the head and the church is the body, all members playing out their role for the good of all. This is Paul's vision for the church.

Paul prays earnestly that the Christians in Thessalonica will never falter but will be steadfast in the faith he taught them. That they will know that Jesus gave his life in love for them, that at Calvary he defeated sin and won salvation for humanity, and that at his Resurrection, he defeated death forever and won new life for all who believe in him. In all the trials and temptations, in all the suffering they may face, they must hold steadfastly to the faith Paul taught them.

Paul's desire is that their lives are rooted in and strengthened by prayer, that they know the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He prays constantly that they may live lives that are holy and that they will look to the coming of King Jesus. He refers to this in the last verse of the passage.

<sup>13</sup>'And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.'

No one knows when Jesus will come again to rule over God's renewed creation but Advent is a time of reflection when, as in Lent, we examine our lives, when we think about what it is Jesus requires of us. It is a time to pray sincerely and ask if we are living a Christian life, what is there in our behaviour that we could change? It is a time to, 'Turn to Christ.'

I think it is good to look at the early Church, to the teachings of St. Paul and to reflect on what he expects of these communities and to ask how the church today lives up to his ideal. It is a time to look closely at his teaching and ask the question, do we behave as he taught? Do we behave as Jesus would want us to?

Our Gospel reading at first glance is difficult, so the first step is to put it into its context. Luke is dealing with the same material we looked at in Mark's gospel on the Second Sunday before Advent. Jesus is teaching in the Temple, he has warned the disciples that this wonderful Temple with all its beauty will, in a few years, only be a heap of rubble.

<sup>20</sup> 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.'

He has made it quite clear that when this happens it is not a time for false bravery or nationalistic pride it is a time to get away.

<sup>21</sup>'Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; <sup>22</sup>for these are days of vengeance,'

What will happen in AD 70 will be apocalyptic to the Jews. The carnage and suffering of those days will be unspeakable, unimaginable. Jesus has already told his disciples that after he has gone they will suffer persecution. Yes they will face councils as he did, they will suffer as he did but Jesus has not left them to face this alone, the Holy Spirit will be within them and the words will be given to them. Still there is the warning of future disaster.

These words immediately precede our passage. It is very tempting to read this simply as a prophecy of the end time but Jesus is very specific.

<sup>23</sup>For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; <sup>24</sup> they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Signs and portents were images which were used to describe the coming of catastrophic events – think of the play Macbeth. Jesus sees the destruction of the Temple as a direct result of the Jewish rejection of him, their Messiah and their God. They have turned their back on him; he will be crucified at their instigation. They will run after false idols of patriotism and rebellion and civil war. The result of this evil will be almost total destruction. Jesus will reign with his Father. The destruction they will bring on themselves will in a way vindicate Christ's message.

<sup>27</sup>'Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Jesus is reigning at his Father's side as King of King and Lord of Lords, this is the message his followers will be proclaiming. Of course the parable of the fig tree fits in, as indeed does the parable of the vineyard. God has sent prophets to the people down the ages and so many of these have been rejected and killed. In the end he sends his son, Jesus is the last of the prophets and he is rejected and killed. The signs of calamity are there for all who have eyes to see. The Jews, particularly their leaders, have brought destruction on themselves. So it will be

<sup>27</sup>'Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Within forty years Jerusalem and the Temple will be rubble. Temple worship will be no more. Christians know that Jesus is the only worthy of worship, the King of Kings, we believe in three persons one God the God who is with us always.

For us reading this today Jesus words echo his second coming, the early Christians believed his coming again was imminent. They are required to behave as if the final judgement were upon them.

<sup>34</sup> 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>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.'

This is true of us too. I remember someone saying, 'If Jesus were to return tomorrow could you face him?' Well that is a salutary thought. Once more we return to the examination of our lives and to the questions, just how much am I trying to live as Jesus taught? Are any parts of my life motivated by selfishness? Do we treat others as Jesus would have us do? What in our lives might we change to enable us to become Jesus' people?

Advent is a time to take stock of our lives, to reflect and to pray. For prayer is at the centre of it all. It is not for nothing that the liturgical colour in Advent is the same as in Lent, purple, the colour of penitence.

*'Come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free, from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.'* C Wesley

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