
Sunday 15th November – The second Sunday before Advent

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 & Matthew 25:14-30

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

The Day of the Lord

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Bags of Gold

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned, I would have received it back with interest.

““So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Reflection

Just recently, I have done something I always enjoy doing at this time of year; I have bought a calendar and diary for 2021. I cannot get on with a diary on my mobile phone – a traditional paper diary with a page for every day is infinitely preferable! The calendar has to have columns for both David and I, so we can record all our appointments, meetings and commitments on it and know what we’re both doing. Similarly in my diary I’ll make a note of birthdays and anniversaries to make sure I don’t miss them.

Thinking of notable dates, I wonder if you know what all these dates have in common? 27th June 2012, 18th May 2013, 28th September 2015, 9th June 2019 and 22nd July 2020? They are all dates that people have predicted for when Christ returns, but our first reading makes it clear that no-one knows when this will happen! Paul makes this clear in the first verse as he says: ‘for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night’.

When Paul speaks of the day of the Lord, he's referring to the day when Christ is to return. In the first century AD, the people believed that Christ would return soon, within their lifetime, and in the chapter before this one, Paul addresses the Thessalonians concern about the fate of those who had already died. Here he speaks about what it will mean for those of us who are still living. Now thieves in the night don't generally make an appointment. They don't call ahead to let us know when they're coming, their arrival is sudden and unexpected. The day of the Lord will be just like that. Paul compares it also to the sudden onset of labour pains. A pregnant woman will have an idea of when her baby is due, and may have a bag packed ready for the event, but none can know when labour will start, and once it does, it cannot be delayed if we're not ready. In a similar way, we can be sure that Christ will return, but we don't know the exact date. We can't write it in our diary. We can't put it on the calendar in the kitchen. But we know it is coming, and we need to be ready. When it comes it promises to bring destruction to those who are unbelievers, who are complacent in their belief that everything in their life is peaceful and secure. This is reflected also in our gospel reading, which illustrates the fate of those who are not faithful, who have not invested in the work of the kingdom and who are unfaithful. 'And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (verse 30).

But if we have placed our trust and faith in Christ this should come as no surprise. Paul uses the contrasting themes of darkness and light to illustrate this. We are called children of the light; if the light of Christ has broken into our lives it is part of who we are, it's part of our identity. We belong to the new world, not the old one, and as such are free from the fear, uncertainty and insecurity of the night.

We do however, need to be careful that we do not slip back into complacency. We need to armour ourselves with faith, hope and love. The breastplate of faith and love protects us from frontal attack, and the hope of salvation is our helmet, protecting our heads and our minds. We know how this story ends. Jesus has the victory and we can be confident because 'He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him' (verse 10).

We know where we're going, to an eternal future with Jesus. We don't know when this will be, we can't write it in our diaries, but for us, though it will be sudden it should not be unexpected. So be sober, be watchful, as you wait for your salvation. And as Paul says in verse 11, encourage one another. We need each other. I need your support and encouragement to hold fast to the gospel and you need mine, so that together we can find in Jesus all the strength and comfort we need.

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