

Like a thief in the night **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 19th November 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**, Matthew 25:14-30

Introduction: summary of last week

Today we conclude our sermon series on St Paul's first letter to the young church in Thessalonica in northern Greece. Last week we thought about what it means to be living a life that is pleasing to God, and how following God's ways in every area of our lives enables us to contribute to being part of God's solution to the troubles of the world, instead of being part of the problem.

We also thought about how November is a month of remembering, especially remembering the saints of the past, those we love who have died, and those whose lives have been given and taken away in war.

Christ's Second Coming

In the second half of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul addresses concerns that some members of the church had about their loved ones who had died. Paul had taught them that Jesus had died, had risen from the dead and would soon be returning in glory to take us to heaven for eternity. Some were afraid that their loved ones who had already died would miss out on this. But Paul reassured them:

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will

descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.¹

The Second Coming of Christ was an important part of the gospel message of the early Church. It is included in both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, and is summarised in the words we use in our Common Worship Communion service:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

It is also the theme of Advent, which will start in two weeks' time. Paul had concluded his speech to the philosophers in Athens with these words:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.²

The teaching about Christ coming as judge builds on an important concept in many of the Old Testament prophets – “the Day of the Lord”, which referred to a day of reckoning in the future, when God would bring injustice to an end and punish those who had perpetrated it.

The early Church understood that Jesus' return as judge would happen soon. Just before his ascension, Jesus' apostles ask him “Lord, is this the time when you will restore

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 NRSV

² Acts 17:30-31 NRSV

the kingdom to Israel?”³ This expectation was raised by Jesus’ own words about the future, which we will hear in the gospel reading on Advent Sunday. At the end of the book of Revelation, in the penultimate verse of the Bible, Jesus promises “Surely, I am coming soon.”⁴ Now, two thousand years later, it still has not happened. I’ll be honest that I wonder quite how we are to interpret this teaching: should we understand it as a literal event at one moment in time which is yet to come, or perhaps as a cosmic event outside of time?

But what can be in no doubt is that all of us will one day meet our Maker and be held accountable for what we have done in our lives. We shall all face the Day of Judgement. Are we ready for this?

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells a story about a wealthy man going away and leaving his servants to manage his assets. It’s not too difficult to see that the man in the story represents Jesus himself, who has gone away and has entrusted to his church – and that includes each one of us – the responsibility to carry on his mission and spread the gospel using the resources that he has given us. These include our natural gifts and skills, our money, our church, our opportunities in our community or workplace, our contacts. In the parable, the man went away for a long time, but then came back and expected his servants to account for how they had managed his property. And so, Jesus implies, when *he* returns he will expect some accountability from us.

³ Acts 1:6 NRSV

⁴ Revelation 22:20 NRSV

Two of the servants had traded with their master's money and made a substantial return. One had opted out and simply kept the money safe in the ground. When Jesus comes back, what will we have done with the gifts and opportunities we have been given?

Accountability is a key part of how our society is run. Next door is our church school, and we are currently expecting to have an inspection by Ofsted. In the old days, they used to give you a couple of weeks' notice, and so teachers and admin staff would beaver away getting all the paperwork in order, tidying up the displays on the walls and so on, so that the school would present its absolutely best face on the day. Nowadays, an Ofsted inspection comes at a day's notice. They want to see what a typical day in the school is like. There is not time to put things right at the last minute.

St Paul says that the return of Jesus will be like that.

For you yourselves know very well [he says] that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.⁵

His phrase "like a thief in the night" is probably a direct reference to words of Jesus in the prophetic section of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus speaks of his second coming and warns his followers to be ready, and says this:

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.⁶

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:2 NRSV

⁶ Matthew 24:43 NRSV

We need to be ready for Judgement Day. And that means there's no room for complacency. Paul tells it straight, and these may sound like quite harsh words.

When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

Now, of course, never having been a pregnant woman (!!) I have no personal experience of what it's like to go into labour, but through being married to a midwife I have heard a bit about how things often go. Women are encouraged to make a birth plan, and they might have lovely ideas about giving birth in water, with their partner beside them, soft music playing, etc. When they go into labour things don't always work out as planned.

But one thing is certain – that baby has got to come out. And in most cases a couple have the best part of nine months to prepare for it, going to antenatal classes, reading up about birth, meeting their midwife, hearing the experiences of other women and so on. And getting a bag packed ready to go into hospital whenever the day comes.

We too have time to prepare for Judgement Day, and that time is now. You never know when you will meet your Maker. You could walk out of this church, fall over and break your neck. You could have an accident on the way home and be killed. It nearly happened to me when I was eighteen and was knocked off my bike on a main road by a hit-and-run driver. I woke up several hours later in a hospital and realised from then on that every day was a gift.

If today was your last day, would you be pleased with what you had done in it?

Now you may have a whole long list of things you would like to do before you die. I don't mean a bucket list of holiday destinations. I mean a list of things that you know you ought to do, things that others depend on you to do. I have two "to do" lists, one for work and one for home. I have to admit that I haven't got very far down either. But what are the most important things that we ought to get sorted, things that we really ought to have got done but haven't got round to – and maybe things that God would want us to have got done?

November is a month for making wills, and there are various offers for making wills free of charge. Many charities, including St Michael's Church, would like you to think about leaving a legacy. How well have we thought through which people or good causes might benefit from our wills when we are gone?

But there are other important things we ought to get sorted. What about relationships? Are there any relationships that we ought to put right but haven't? Or maybe we've decided that we're *not* going to do anything to put things right with that person? All too often, when there's a funeral, there are things that have been left unsaid, or bridges that have not been mended. I'm sure none of us would want someone close to us to die and we haven't made any attempt to repair a broken relationship, maybe by saying sorry or by deciding to forgive, difficult though that might be.

When Jesus comes again, he will not come as a little baby in a manger with angels singing nice carols. He will come as Judge of all the earth. What will that mean for us?

Well, Paul has been warning people not to be complacent, but he also brings a message of encouragement.

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober [*remember that when Christmas comes!*], and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath [*punishment for our sins*] 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.

Today, as every Sunday, we come to this altar and we receive the bread and wine to remind us again of the sacrifice that Jesus made on the Cross so that our sins could be completely forgiven. As Paul writes elsewhere, God “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.”⁷

So Paul’s advice is simply this: live as children of the light. He is encouraging us, as I said last week, to live lives that are pleasing to God. So let’s make sure that if today was your last day, you’d be happy with what you did in it. “Live each day as if it were your last”. Keep short accounts with God

⁷ Colossians 1:13 NRSV

and others. Have no regrets. Let's live each day in the light of God's presence, and surrounded by his love. And allow his love to flow into us and through us to others.

May our lives, when we finally pass on, be lives that have made a difference for good in the world. When people stand up at our funeral to say a few words about us, may their words be a genuine celebration of how we have touched other people's lives for good. All of us can do that. All of us, who have the Holy Spirit living in us, and who are living in the light of Christ, can bring light to our world.

Please now take a few moments to listen to God and ask him what he might want us to do, or to put right in our lives today.

Silence

Prayer

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful,
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that when he shall appear,
he may not find us sleeping in sin,
but active in his service and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁸

⁸ Post-communion prayer for Advent Sunday, *Common Worship*.