

Reflection for Sunday 15th November (2nd Sunday before Advent)

Bible reading:

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

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, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons 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 alert and self-controlled. 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 self-controlled, 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.

Reflection.

'You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night'. Paul's words echo the words of Jesus roughly twenty years earlier. No one can know when Jesus will return. That day will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Many times in the past, people have tried to predict that day and – so far – they have all been made to look foolish.

The day will come when we do not expect it. As we draw towards Advent and the start of a new church year, in a couple weeks' time, we can look back and reflect on a year that few if any of us could have predicted. None of us knew that this would be a year unlike any that we have lived through before and we were not ready.

This leads me to ponder the question 'What does being ready for Jesus' return mean?' It would be easy to read Paul's statements about belonging to the dark or the light as very binary. If you belong to the light [Jesus] you're ready. But that seems to me to be over simplistic and only a short step away from an 'I'm alright Jack...' sort of thinking.

If you imagine for a moment that Jesus will return today; would you be ready?

For some, the answer would be a definite 'No!'

For some, the answer would be an unqualified 'Yes!'

For some of us there would be feelings of great joy mixed with just a little bit of nervousness; like the feelings you have when a great friend you haven't seen for a long while, turns up unexpectedly at your house. You are overjoyed to see them, but at the same time conscious that the house isn't nearly as tidy as you would like it to be.

So how can we be ready for this one who comes like a 'thief in the night'.

In Matthew 24, Jesus says 'If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.' (Matthew 24:43). Jesus is making the point that this approach doesn't work if you don't know when to take

the extraordinary action of keeping watch. We cannot be ready for Jesus return by doing something extraordinary because we will not know when to do it.

So, what does 'being ready' mean? I think the clue is in the phrase. It's about 'being'; about who we are rather than something we do to get ready. That is what Paul is getting at when he refers to the Christians in Thessalonica as 'children of light and children of the day'. As Christians, we know that God's Kingdom has already arrived because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and it will be fulfilled when he returns. That is who we are.

To illustrate this idea of being ready, I'd like to think about another story of a thief in the night. In *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, Jean Valjean is released from a French prison after serving nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread. No one is willing to give him shelter because he is an ex-convict. In desperation Valjean knocks on the door of a bishop who takes him in and treats him with kindness. Valjean repays the bishop by stealing his silverware in the night. When the police arrest him and bring him back, the bishop covers for Valjean, claiming that the silverware was a gift and adding an extra piece that he says Valjean forgot to take. The authorities release Valjean and the bishop makes him promise to become an honest man.

In this story, the bishop is ready for the thief in the night – not by locking his silver in a safe or relying on the law to bring it back to him but by knowing that the chance to change Valjean's life for good is worth much more than a few pieces of silver. He cannot know for sure Valjean will respond to his kindness, but he does it anyway. That is who he is!

As this year, unlike any other that we have experienced, draws towards its close; how can we be ready for what is to come?

Paul points us towards the answer in the last verses of the reading '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.'

May that encouraging and building each other up be part of our being and our readiness, today and always.

Jonathan.