



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

1 Thessalonians 4.13-18

Matthew 25.1-13

This Sunday is Remembrance Sunday. Often the reading is 'The Beatitudes' which we looked at last week. It is worth looking at that again, if you have time, as we remember all who have given their lives; also to pray for peace in our troubled world.

Last week we looked at the readings for All Saints Day and so the readings we are looking at from Thessalonians have not followed in sequence. The reading set for Sunday morning is from chapter four.

I wrote this when giving some background to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians:

'Paul and his co-workers have 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, a God of love. They tell of his Son Jesus Christ, the God who became human 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.'

The community of Christians in Thessalonica is very new, they face persecution and danger. It is obvious, from what Paul writes in his epistle to them, that he not only has a high regard for them but that he has a great affection for them. He is constantly saying that he remembers them in his prayers. He is not with them in person and he is worried for them, they are being persecuted and it would be easy for them to give up in the face of that. He can't speak to them personally so he says, ³ 'Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; ² 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, ³ so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.' Imagine Paul's delight when Timothy returns bringing good news of the Christians in Thessalonica.

⁶ '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. ⁷For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith.'

Paul like the Thessalonians has faced persecution. They were suffering as Jesus had, as Paul was doing and as all Christians are called to do, 'take up your cross and follow me,' was something they were living out in their everyday lives.

Paul writes in more detail of the Thessalonian Christians in the verses just prior to our reading. They really are living out the Good News of Jesus in their daily lives. Paul has said in Galatians 3

²⁸ 'Because all of you are one in the Messiah Jesus, a person is no longer a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a male or a female.'

This philosophy would have been impossible in the culture they were brought up in. Now however they were welcoming others as brothers and sisters in Christ. They are living in equality as a Christian family, not only this but they are giving financial support to the 'Christian family in the whole of Macedonia.' They are taking the teaching of equality and of sharing what you have with those who are less fortunate literally. Paul commends them for this but encourages them to continue in that way of life. In other words as Paul says they are living out Christ's teaching of 'love one another as I have loved you.'

'we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one.'

This might sound introspective but that is not the case as 'behave properly towards outsiders' shows. This living out of Jesus' teaching prompted the words 'See how these Christians love one another.' Paul is making it clear as Jesus did that actually they must show love for all.

Jesus' teaching and Paul's teaching applied to the newly established Christian communities and of course applies equally to us, to our personal behaviour and to our church communities too. We need to read everything in this light.

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.

Each week we say in the Creed,

'He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end...we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.'

This is our statement of belief, this is central to our belief. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, he is the Anointed One. We look forward to God's renewed creation when Jesus will come again as King and judge, when all is brought to perfection. All Christian people, the living and the dead, will be united with him in God's new creation.

We have seen John address this in our reading last week where he says,

² 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.' 1 John 3

Here Paul is writing of the 'end time.' He tries to describe how this will be. I know we have all asked ourselves what will happen after death. No one knows but we have our faith in Jesus' promise of salvation and eternal life with him. Faith is trust and we trust in those promises. The actual process we do not know. What Paul is doing is describing the indescribable and when we try to do that we do so in figurative language, by using images.

We are approaching Advent when we look forward to Jesus' coming as our King at Christmas, God incarnate, but also to his second coming as King and judge which Paul is referring to here. ¹⁶ '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.'

The picture that Paul paints here has inspired art, music, poetry, whole philosophies. We can all think of paintings showing this or pieces of music or poems like Donne's Holy Sonnet VII

'At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scatter'd bodies go;'

Think for example of hymns like, 'Lo he comes with clouds descending.'

Paul is painting a picture as an aid to understanding. Imagine trying to describe a rose to someone who cannot see. Metaphor is the only thing possible.

We cannot know how things will be brought to fruition only that they will be. This is a reading that is often used on Remembrance Sunday, it is from Isaiah 11.6

⁶ 'The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.'

Certainly our behaviour, the behaviour of all Christians should be in tune with Jesus' teachings and God's new creation.

What Paul says next is Jesus promise; it is our belief, our faith. 'and so we will be with the Lord for ever.' It is good to say, 'Into thy hands O Lord I commend my spirit.'

Our Gospel reading is a famous one, the story of the foolish and wise bridesmaids. We have spoken of Paul using imagery in the reading from the epistle when he tries to explain what the end time will be like. Jesus uses word pictures too when he says things like, 'in my Father's house there are many dwelling places' or as here 'The kingdom of heaven is like.' We have looked at the parable of the wedding banquet in the reflection for Proper 23. Jesus is the bridegroom. The long awaited Messiah. Firstly it is important to say that the story Jesus tells here is grounded in reality. This is exactly how a marriage ceremony would be conducted. We remember that Jesus' first recorded miracle was the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Cana. The bridesmaids would accompany the bride and

the bridegroom would turn up and expect them to be ready. He could turn up at any time and the only warning would be from a man who went ahead and announced his arrival. After that there would be a procession, a banquet and week-long rejoicing. In chapter 22 Jesus says,
²'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.' This is it in a nutshell.

Jesus is the bridegroom referred to. Five of the bridesmaids though sleeping as they awaited the bridegroom, were ready and prepared. They could join the joyful procession to the wedding banquet. The foolish ones had no oil for their lamps, you were not allowed onto the streets without. So while they go to try to get some they miss his coming. They were not admitted to the wedding banquet.

Jesus has said that God has sent him to his chosen people the Jews. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That is true; initially Jesus' mission was to give the good news to the Jews. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. What happened? So many ignored the invitation sent out by God in his Son. They are preoccupied by their own concerns or prejudices and failed to recognise the Messiah. They are unprepared and do not even recognise the Messiah when he comes. In fact the religious rulers lead the people astray, they are described as 'blind guides' and 'whited sepulchres'.

Jesus does not just refer to the leaders in this parable but all those who have rejected his message, all those who are not prepared to recognise him as the Anointed One. Matthew 13,
⁵⁷ 'But Jesus, said unto them, 'A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.'

That was the initial message contained in this parable. The wise bridesmaids are those people who live their lives so that they are ready to meet the long awaited Messiah and recognise him when he comes like the people Jesus refers to in the Beatitudes.

Think of Simeon and Anna in the Temple, of John the Baptist and of Jesus' first band of followers. Think of Peter who proclaimed, 'You are the Messiah the Son of the living God.'

This parable applies to us now. We do not know when Jesus will return to judge the earth but we are called to be ready. Paul has congratulated the Thessalonians on their following of the teaching of Jesus, on the fact that they try to live their lives according to Jesus' way. We are called to do the same. If we call ourselves Christians then we have to be prepared not only for his coming but to live out the love of God in our everyday lives.

Jesus is our Saviour and Messiah, he has promised, 'I am with you always even to the end of the age.' His Good News turned the world upside down. We have made our promises to him, to live our lives according to his teaching, to work to establish the kingdom values. Then we will be prepared for the great wedding banquet and for the coming of our King Jesus.

More than that, Jesus is with us now. He walks alongside us throughout our lives. We talk to God in our prayers and he strengthens us and upholds us. We are so lucky in that we worship God who has a close ongoing relationship with us his children.

We as Christians need to be outward looking in service. We have the opportunity to join with all those who are already showing self-giving love to others; to pray, to bring comfort and happiness when we can.

I was rereading the words of this Canadian Creed which we used in the Wednesday service at Spital Chapel and really it seemed to sum it all up so I am quoting part of it:

*'In death, in life, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.'*

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