CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	15 November 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Second Sunday before Advent
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

'As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.

On the face of it, this text does not perhaps seem to be an ideal one for safeguarding Sunday whose theme this year is Love Protects.

But Jesus's parable of the talents which we hear in today's gospel reminds us of our obligation to nurture what all that we have been given. The man in the parable entrusts what he owns to his servants. The servants are then accountable back to him for precisely what they have done with the talents they were originally given.

Here at the cathedral, we are entrusted with so many things that we seek to treasure, love and protect. But the people who come here are what, as Christians, we are called to value most. Whether they are members of our worshipping congregations, or the quarter of a million visitors and pilgrims who come every year; or our many volunteers, or our employees or of course our wonderfully gifted choristers: they are the most precious things we have here. And especially members of all those groups who are, in whatever way, vulnerable.

On this safeguarding Sunday we remember that we are accountable for them – to secular authorities of course – but ultimately also to God, and we remind ourselves of these responsibilities and of the ways in which we seek to discharge them.

I will move now from the gospel to today's second reading.

'Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown; Jesus we know, and he is on the throne.'

That is a line in one of my favourite hymns, by the Reverend Edward Henry Bickersteth, a fellow resident of Sussex. We are shortly going to sing it as the communion hymn.

The current times seem to remind us continually that our future is indeed unknown. That has been the normal situation of human beings throughout history but perhaps not so long ago, there was perhaps a brief time when the future did seem more predictable. Towards the end of the twentieth century, one commentator notoriously wrote about what he called 'the end of history': the time he thought we had now reached when everything would settle down to a reasonably predictable pattern based on democratic government and free markets, and the chopping and changing of events would come to an end. How unrealistic that now sounds.

It seems from today's New Testament reading that Christians in Thessalonica around the year 50 AD also wanted to know about the future. They had been told that the Lord Jesus would return to bring in God's Kingdom. And it seems that they had been speculating about exactly when this would happen. They sought a clearer and more certain future.

But in our New Testament reading, St Paul tells the Thessalonians that this information cannot and will not be available to them. 'The day of the Lord', he says, 'will come like a thief in the night' – like the arrival of somebody who does not announce his coming in any way. Jesus himself had taught a very similar thing: 'about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father' (Mt 24.36).

So how do we deal with a future that is uncertain? Three pieces of advice are given to the Thessalonians of the first century and to us today:

First of all, 'let us keep awake and be sober'. The two things characteristically done in the night in the ancient world – and probably also today – are to sleep and to get drunk. I don't think Paul is necessarily condemning here those of us who like to have an early night, or indeed those who like a drink. But what he is emphasising is the need to be spiritually alert and prepared; to be disciplined in prayer and other spiritual disciplines and indeed not to be so drunk or drugged not only on substances but also on things like entertainment and social media that we lose our cool heads.

Secondly, using a military metaphor, Paul says put on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet the hope of salvation. Those three virtues: faith, hope and love are often called the 'theological virtues'. Paul returns to them famously in another letter to the Corinthians where he says that 'these three remain: faith, hope and love but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13.13). At times of uncertainty, international tensions, financial and environmental concerns, fear is very evident, and can drive decision making at every level. As Christians, we remember the gift of these wonderful virtues are the primary motivators in the Christian life to power us and fuel our lives. Faith, hope and love are what are truly able to drive us, and not – however strong they may be – our feelings of apprehension and fear.

And a third piece of instruction from St Paul is: 'encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing'. In an age when a rapidly increasing amount is given over to machines and algorithms, the Church's role of offering genuine human community becomes increasingly important. Here real human beings, and not friends or counsellors who have been generated by AI on your computer... real human beings are able to offer mutual encouragement, upbuilding and support – as indeed on

Safeguarding Sunday, we are encouraged to do. There is really no substitute for it.

'Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown' writes Edward Bickersteth, 'Jesus we know, and he is on the throne.'

Bickersteth in his hymn draws the comparison between, on the one hand, the future that, as St Paul reminds us, we do not and cannot know whether we are first century Thessalonians or twenty-first century Brits. And, on the other hand, Jesus whom we do know and who is on the throne. We do not know when he will return: the time or the season, the day or the hour; we do not know how our phase of human history will ultimately turn out. But we do know Jesus Christ, whom we meet in word and sacrament and who, by his Holy Spirit is with us and in us, and we do believe – even when it is sometimes hard to do so – that ultimately God holds the future.