

Revd Dr Irene Smale Sermon Mattins Advent 1 December 2019

1 Thessalonians 5 v 1-11

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent.

Christmas cards, gifts, trees and lights have been sold in the shops since September. Edgar the excitable fire-breathing dragon is lighting up our tv screens, directing us towards all the delights that await in John Lewis.

For those who have seen the advert, critics tell us that the underlying message of the catastrophic antics of Edgar is to reassure us that feelings of failure, rejection and isolation can be successfully conquered through friendship, forgiveness, love and hope. All wrapped up in the sharing of a gift, even if it's only a simple Christmas pudding.

I maybe stretching a point but at the end of the advert we might just be able to draw a certain similarity between the communal sharing of a restorative meal, gathered round a vast banquet table and the celebration of communion. Whereupon Edgar the outcast is forgiven and welcomed back into the fold.

It's a subliminal message and arguably not the gospel narrative as we know it but at least within the subtext, there is a sense of hope. And hope is embodied in the season of Advent. In fact, the hope of Christ's return is proclaimed over 300 times throughout the New Testament.

For example, in our lesson today Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica and encourages the believers to stay alert, keep watch and to live in peace with one another in faith, love and hope. He exhorts them to be ready. Because Christ's return will be sudden and unexpected.

I believe that what Paul is implying here is that it's important to continually walk in the light, to live lives that are pure, clean, holy and acceptable to God. And to keep a right relationship with one another, encouraging each other as we look forward to that great day of salvation.

But also, to put Paul's concerns into context, he had been guided by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel in Macedonia. Once known as the kingdom of Alexander the Great. Paul had planted a church in Thessalonica, a vast metropolis named after Alexander's half-sister. It was renowned for its harbour, previously a vast naval base for Persia and a colossal dockyard for the Roman fleet.

The city's location was extremely strategic, built on the Via Egnatia. A 700 mile Roman road linking the Adriatic and Bosphorus Seas. Therefore, the church in Thessalonica was ideally placed for spreading the Gospel far and wide.

Paul writes specifically to the Thessalonians about the hope of Christ's second coming because although they were strong in faith and love they were weak in hope. And scholars tend to attribute this in part to their inherent Greek philosophical views on death.

They appeared to be preoccupied with death, and the fate of their loved ones who had already died before them. Is it too late for those who have already died before Christ's return? Or will they too be raised from the dead?

There was much Greek thought that Paul had to address. For example the philosopher Epicurus had said:

"Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And once it does come, we no longer exist."

And Paul is keen to deal with such misunderstanding as a result of Greek philosophy which left people bereft with no future hope. He regarded 'future hope' as fundamental teaching especially for new Christians.

It was his duty to reassure the Thessalonian believers that they should not grieve as others do. For when Jesus returns, the dead will actually be the first to greet him, followed closely by those who are still alive at his coming.

As my husband and I get older conversations with our own children often focus on our future and their inheritance. For example, our eldest son recently confessed: "Mum and Dad its going to be hard enough coping when you eventually leave this earth. But with all due respect do you think you could please clear out your loft before you go because that's one of my biggest fears!"

Although the season of Advent is full of hope, it can also awaken those feelings of sadness for us who have lost loved ones, especially around this time of year. Many of the regular cathedral congregation will know that we lost our first grandson several years ago to a rare illness. His younger brother who wasn't born at the time, knows about him. One evening, when I was saying bedtime prayers with him, he prayed:

Dear God, please send my brother back because I never got to know him and I never got to play with him. Amen.

A very naïve, succinct but very meaningful prayer of a little child. But also, one that may resonate with us as we relate to those feelings of the loss of a loved one. I was slightly thrown by his unexpected plea - "please send him back". Then I recalled Paul's words to the Thessalonians in chapter 4:

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

I believe we can draw great comfort during the season of Advent, as we watch and pray and wait patiently in sure and certain hope.

Even so come Lord Jesus.