

It is not long now till Christmas day and I can see the excitement in your faces!!!!

The advantage is of course that we know when Christmas is. Like it or not it will happen on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec this year as it has for centuries. I understand that it was Pope Julius I in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century who fixed that date. But we know when it is.

However as we look at the return of Jesus during this advent season one of the things we do not know is when he will return.

As we continue looking at 1 Thessalonians we see Paul briefly addresses this issue.

Writing to Christians, who, aware that Jesus had not already returned, were concerned about Christians who had died and whether they would somehow miss out, Paul wrote to reassure them on that score but then he turns to these Christians and explains to them how they should live as they wait for Jesus and of course that applies directly to us as we wait for that day.

### 1. about times and dates v1-3

The first thing Paul said was we don't need to write to you about when Jesus will return. That was presumably because they also understood that no one knows when that day will be. We just do not know when. However Paul goes on to use three images about the return.

He says v2 it will come like a thief in the night that is it will be **unpredictable**. I don't know whether you have ever had a burglar in your house. We did when we lived in the centre of London. We came back late one afternoon to find we'd been robbed. If only the burglar had texted he was coming I could have been prepared.

Paul wrote of people imagining all is well speaking of peace and safety only to meet destruction. It will happen at an **unexpected** time. I find it fascinating that people spend hours poring over the Bible trying to work out when Jesus will return. Chris McCann, leader and founder of the eBible fellowship, was so convinced about the end of the world taking place on 7<sup>th</sup> Oct this year that he decided to create a five-part podcast series about it. It didn't happen. People try and read the signs, wars and rumours of wars and so on and yet God here is saying you don't know and it will happen almost when people least expect it.

However the last image of the mother giving birth reminds us that the return is **unavoidable**. It is going to happen but of course again we know from bitter experience that the birth of a child can happen at an unpredictable and unexpected time.

I hope we get the point we don't know when and it is futile trying to work it out.

But that doesn't mean we can as it were park it as not important. I don't know about you but I thrive on deadlines. I need them to give me the urgency to get things done. So if I think something is not happening for months well I put it aside.

There is a real possibility we could do that with the second coming isn't there?

Indeed the very fact that Jesus hasn't returned might make us think it is never going to happen.

Six years ago I preached here on this passage and said that, "As time goes on it is easy to think as it hasn't happened already it probably won't ever happen – a bit like a Brit winning Wimbledon, because that has never happened and doesn't look like it ever will." Well that did happen and not only that but last weekend we won the Davis Cup. The other image I used six years ago as something that hadn't happened and so was easy to think would never was Kettering Town getting into the Football league – so let's see in six years' time!!

Paul's point to these Christians was that even though they didn't know when Jesus would come back that didn't mean they should ignore the fact that he would. Rather it should help shape their thinking and acting and it should ours as well.

## **2. It makes a difference v4-11**

Do you have Christmas memories? Of course you do and I have loads though not too many from childhood. But I do remember one year. I and my brothers had been given torches for Christmas which you could change from white light to red or green. It was usual on Christmas day for our grandparents to come round to see us about tea time. So, as it got dark, we hid under the table with our torches ready to surprise Nan and Pop when they arrived. But we didn't know when so there we were waiting. Knowing they were coming affected our behaviour we got ready and waited.

In a sense that is what Paul says in the rest of this passage.

The return of Jesus should make a difference to these Christians because of who they are. Did you notice that in the passage?

V4 "But you" – they Paul says are not in the dark. That is they know. They know Christ will return and so that should affect them while it will not affect those who either don't know or refuse to accept it.

The child who knows Father Christmas exists will write the letter and put out the stocking!

They are in the know and v9 they have a destiny. They are not destined to face God's judgement and wrath but are on the way to the fullness of salvation. They were God's children.

It is in the light of that that Paul encourages them to action, v6 "so then...".

You are God's children who are on the path to heaven and who know one day Jesus will return so then as you wait..... what? What did Paul call them to do and what does it say to us who are also waiting for that day? Just as there is something Christians know that others don't so there is a way Christians live that others don't,

Paul here reminds us that as followers of Jesus, knowing he will one day return should affect the way we live while we wait.

**a. so then be alert** and he refers to being asleep or drunk as images of not being alert. We are to be bright eyed and bushy tailed with regards to our faith. We are to be alert to the fact that Jesus might return today and all those presents you have bought might not get to the people you bought them for. Do you believe that? Do you believe that he could come today?

I was out walking recently and saw a man with a dog. The man was throwing a ball for the dog who would chase it and bring it back, drop it and wait with anticipation for the next throw. The man met a friend and got talking and the dog remained there waiting and still with the same anticipation.

Now please don't imagine I am calling you dogs but I hope we can get a sense of what I think Paul is referring to here when he says alert. It is that sense of eager anticipation, in cricket terms of the slips going down ready for a catch, alert to the possibilities and so ready for it. God is calling us to be on our toes. So are we alert and ready?

Have you ever overslept and missed something? Someone told me recently of how they had overslept and been woken by the phone going saying the taxi was at the door to take them to the airport. You can hardly go in your pyjamas can you? Being alert means we are living ready for that day so that when Jesus returns he finds us ready, fit for purpose, walking in the light.

Let us think about this and about our lives as followers of Christ and while we are never going to live perfect lives let's make sure we keep short accounts with God in that we regularly come to God and ask forgiveness for our sin and get our lives back on track. It is as we are on our knees in prayer that we continually bring ourselves back to God and live our lives under his will and in his grace. In this way we are remain on watch and alert. It is a bit like the shipping people who tune in regularly to the shipping forecast so that they are prepared for what is to come.

**b. so then be self-controlled.** What Paul has in mind here is spelled out a bit in v8, "let us be self-controlled putting on (or better having put on) faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet."

Paul describes these Christians as having put on a breastplate. The breastplate would rest on the shoulders but cover the torso and especially the heart. Paul was saying they had given their hearts to Jesus and put their faith in him and that needed to be guarded. They needed to protect their hearts to ward off the temptations of the world around them so that they could live holy lives, lives that were marked by self control as they waited for the return of Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago, as we finished our series on Joshua, we saw God calling to his people to throw away their false gods and I mentioned Nick Page's book the dark night of the shed where he lists a number of these gods which tempt us such as Lycra the god of youth, dosh the god of wealth and possessions, exhaustus the god of work and kudos the god of status. These and many other things can claim our hearts and become the things we love more than any other. They become the

things we seek after and they can claim our faith as we put our hope and trust in them. Throughout the Bible there is this same warning to guard our hearts and to lay aside these false gods. It is again on our knees that we do this. On our knees that we daily put on the breastplate of faith and love. On our knees that we rekindle the flame of love for God and faith in him and him alone which then enables us to live those holy lives self-controlled and ready for the return of Jesus.

Then Paul speaks of the helmet of the hope of salvation. The helmet protects the head and the hope of salvation, the hope of heaven helps to keep us self-controlled as we look to that day when we will be with God in heaven. It protects our thinking and our minds then help us to keep on going no matter what rubbish and stresses the path of our life takes us through.

Can I just say I blame Peter Chiverton. He has inflicted so much pain on me in this last year. He has got me out running with a few others and at times I have thought that to die would be better than to keep on running. We try to do a loop round Chineham which is 5 kilometres. It is well outside my comfort zone. I mean if you wish to go that far there is a car! However I have done it but the last section up the Reading Road past the church and back to Hartswood is hard. However, having a vague competitive streak I am usually determined not to give up and here is where the head comes in. I can see the bus stop at the end of my road and in my head I keep saying come on keep going come on it is worth it. The goal the end drawing me on and keeping me going. The hope of salvation helps to keep us going. The understanding, as Tim Hedgecock put it last week, that “nothing that plagues us here will follow us there”. So we battle on in faith and love with the hope of salvation our spur, our dynamic. But again so much of that is achieved on our knees in prayer as we bring to God the things that weigh us down and renew our vision of what is yet to be.

We do not know when Jesus will come back but as we wait for him God calls us to remain alert and self controlled. To be on our toes, to be on our knees, to use our shoulders and get our heads right. Heads, shoulders, knees and toes but with the great emphasis on being on our knees so that through prayer we kindle our love and faith, through prayer we keep our minds set on our goal of heaven and through prayer we remain alert to the things of God, to the expectation that one day our Lord will return in glory and power.