

Advent Sunday sees us continuing looking at 1 Thessalonians and at this passage which focuses us on the return of Jesus.

Now I can understand if some of you are a bit fed up every year thinking about this and wondering, "is it ever going to happen?" 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 or perhaps better Kettering getting into the Football league because that has never happened and doesn't look like it ever will.

When Paul wrote to these Christians in Thessalonica the issue was slightly different. They expected the return at any moment and were probably very excited by it. I remember back 10 years to the end of the last millennium when a number predicted Jesus would return and some Christians got quite excited. In Thessalonica they were excited and I think here Paul writes to calm down such speculation about when and instead remind them how they should live as they wait.

Today there is also a difference from last week. Then in 4:13 he wrote because they didn't know where as here he's writing about something that they do know about.

If we look at v1-3 we see that Paul's aware that they knew about the Day of the Lord, the return of Jesus in power and majesty.

What did they know?

Well in v2&3 Paul used three pictures to remind them.

1. a thief in the night 2. Not peace but destruction and 3 the labour pains of a pregnant woman.

What was he reminding them of through those pictures? Well suddenness is there of course but three words about this day of the Lord, unexpected, destructive and inevitable.

Like a thief the day will come without warning. These Christians were looking at signs and trying to use various things to predict when the day would be but Paul says you can't predict that day.

It will be a destructive because it will be a day of Judgement. The Jewish Christians in Thessalonica would know this. I have been going through Joel in my quiet times last week and the Day of the Lord is depicted there as a day of Judgement on the nations as we see from these verses: . "Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty." (1:15) "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness." (2:2).

Christ will return as judge and so to say peace and all is well is a false hope.

More that day like labour pains for a pregnant woman is inevitable. It must eventually happen as my daughter is about to find out!

However, the point of Paul writing this was not to give them or us a theology lesson but to encourage a suitable Christian response to the expectation that one day Jesus will return as Judge.

The overall response to those Christians was calm down dear. They were very excited over it and Paul's words in v1-3 was, "look we don't know when so stop speculating and get on with living."

Then the main practical point is that because they know the Day is coming it shouldn't surprise them,

v4. They were not in dark.

I know we have a saying about keeping people in the dark as a metaphor for people not knowing something, but here Paul is using the metaphor of dark and light and night and day to explain the division between those who are followers of Christ and those who are not. In John we read how the light came into the world but men preferred darkness. Paul is speaking directly to those who are following Jesus whom he refers to in v5 as sons of the light and of the day.

Overnight on August 12 1961, tens of thousands of guards, soldiers and police hastily erected checkpoints and barbed-wire barriers across Berlin, imprisoning their own people and cementing - literally - the Cold War division of Europe.

On what became known as "Barbed Wire Sunday", some awoke to find themselves suddenly trapped in the Soviet sectors, separated overnight from families, friends and loved ones who happened to live on the other side of the Wall.

Images of panicked East Berliners who lived on Bernauer Strasse, a street that ran along the border, jumping out of their apartment windows into nets held by West Berlin firemen were beamed to a shocked world.

One resident, 77-year-old Frieda Schulze, found herself in a dramatic tug-of-war between east and west as she dangled from her apartment window, her arms gripped by East Berlin officials inside the room and her legs by West Berlin firemen on the street below.

Karola Habedank, a small child living in East Berlin at the time, said that she and her family were saved by friends in the West who heard rumours the border was to be closed.

On the morning of August 13, the family fled East Berlin using identity passes provided by their western friends.

It mattered on which side of the wall you were.

How much more does it matter that we are in Christ, on his side and not against him. If we are not on his side it is not just a matter of repression and doing without but of having no eternal future. Separated from God by our sin there is no hope but Christ came and bore our sin on the cross that we might be brought back to God and be on his side.

Those people in Berlin would do almost anything to get across the wall. If today you know that you are not on the side of Christ let me encourage you to do everything that lies within you to come to him.

But here Paul was writing to those who had become followers of Christ and he tells them that as they know the day is coming they need to be living in the light of that and that means living in the light, that is walking with Jesus.

V6 "so then", that is in the light of the return of Jesus, "let us not be like others who are asleep" that is let's not be like those who know nothing of Christ and are unaware of his return, "but let us be alert and self controlled."

Two things he calls them to do and explains them in the next two verses. Firstly

they were to be alert or awake v6&7.

They were people of the day and light so to be awake is natural but in v 7 Paul spoke of sleep and being drunk. What he was telling them to do was to have their minds right in terms of the return, to be alert to the fact that it would happen and looking for it. Living with it in mind. In Ro 12:2 Paul spoke of the renewed mind, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—

his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Here is that mind awake to God his will and purposes and living in the light of the fact that one day Jesus will return to Judge the earth.

How should that affect the way they lived? Well secondly

they were to be self controlled v8.

That is, as David Josey was sharing with us a couple of weeks ago, living holy lives. That is God’s will for them and for us. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified (holy)” (4:3).

They were to live disciplined lives through those three marks of the Christian nature we saw in the first of this series, faith love and hope. Here Paul links them to armour and they were to put on faith and love as a breastplate and hope of salvation as the helmet. Just as the soldier will put on his body armour before going out so that he can live and serve so these Christians and we in our day need the same.

Renewed minds giving rise to holy lives lived in faith love and hope.

Friends this is Advent Sunday that is the date and as we have already spoken about in the service we will be doing all kinds of things in the next four weeks to get ready for another date which we know. But the date of the return of Jesus we don’t know however it will come and it is inevitable. We are in the time of preparation for that return.

Over these next weeks we may not get much time to stop and think about our lives in relation to that return but here and now we do because I’m telling you we do.

“So thenlet us be alert and self controlled”.

Are we awake and alert to God and are we self controlled living disciplined holy lives.

Now could well be the time for a kairos moment:

Observe - your life with Christ as it is at the moment.

Reflect – on what Paul is saying here. Are you living a sleepy life, half awake in a stupor? Are there things in your life which you would not want a friend to know about let alone Jesus when he returns? It is when our minds are not alert that we do things wrong. Have you ever been driving and you feel tired and you recognise that your reactions are not what they should be – no of course you haven’t! It is when we are tired or not sober behind a wheel that we are a danger to ourselves and others. The same is true in our spiritual lives, where we can find ourselves having committed a sin before we have even stopped to think this is wrong. It is as if we are half awake as if we in a way sleep walk into sin because we are not alert when the temptation comes and we have done wrong before we think. No wonder Paul called them and us to be alert.

Discuss – later on, perhaps over coffee, chat through what you think God is saying to you through this passage. Talk about faith and love and hope, about how you live for Christ in the work place or with your non-Christian relatives or friends. Talk about how easily you slip into doing what is wrong because you are not awake enough to recognise what is going on. Or perhaps you need to talk about the guilt you feel for things that are wrong in your life because another aspect of being wake and alert is that we easily recognise guilt and we deal with it through Christ. It comes into the inbox of our mind and we say yes I did wrong but I’m not going to carry that around with me because there is forgiveness. Talk about it – discuss it. Or if you wish make use of the Prayer team and pray about it with them.

Plan – what you might begin to do in these next days to waken yourself up. You know how when you’re feeling a bit sleepy you might splash water on your face to waken yourself up. What are the steps you might take in your life to be alert and self controlled?

Accountable – explain to someone what you intend to do and

Act – do it, get on with living in the light.

But why – why should they and we do this? Paul gives us the very clear answer in v9 because they have been

appointed for salvation not the wrath of God v9.

And we are destined for salvation because of Jesus. Yes he is coming in power and he will come to judge the earth but if we are in Christ then as Paul reminds us there is no condemnation rather we know our salvation is secure and will at his return be completed. So we look towards the return of Jesus with

Joy not fear v10

because of the death on Jesus v10. The Christ who is coming is the one who died for us and therefore as we wait expectantly there should not be fear but joy

Imagine you are driving down the motorway and you are speeding – I know it is hard but try and imagine it. You keep an eye out in the rear view mirror for that familiar shape of the police car. As you drive there is a little bit of fear especially if you already have points on your licence. But now imagine that you are on the same motorway and have broken down and you are waiting. You’d look forward to seeing a police car come into view or even better the AA now there’s no fear just grateful expectation.

If we are in Christ we wait for his return with joyful expectation because we know he comes to us in love not wrath and he comes to complete our salvation.

One day our Lord will come with power and might to judge the whole earth we wait that day with anticipation and as we wait we live in the light and we

encourage each other v11

We take time to keep each other going in the race.

The last Olympics we saw the GB team win lots of medals in cycling and one of the races is unusual in that it is a kind of pairs race where one cyclist as he finishes his stint gives a pull to the other cyclist to speed him on his way. Encouragement is an important part of the Christian life. As we wait for the return of Jesus we will often need that pull along because the race is hard.

I remember some time back when we did a series on friendship and looked at David and Jonathan we saw how when David was struggling in the desert with Saul at his heels wanting to kill him, Jonathan came to him and “helped him find strength in God” (1 Sam 23:16) or “put his hand in the hand of God” so that God could give him a pull.

What better can we do as friends than put our friends hand in the hand of God? So encourage one another – just as in fact many of you are doing. Last week I spoke in the services about the fact that in the New Year I’m hoping to meet up with every church member one to one to see how we are getting on in our walk with Jesus. The aim I hope is for us to get to know each other a bit better but also for me to see if I can help and

encourage each of you as you walk in the light as you wait the return of Jesus.

Jesus is coming we know that and we are called as his followers to live in the light of that not in fear even though we don't know when he will come but with anticipation that one day in him our salvation will be complete.