

Sunday 15th November: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 & Matthew 25:14-30

How long O Lord? has been the cry of the human heart for millennia.
I wonder what your how long Lord, cry is today?

O Lord when will this all be over? When will we see our friends and family again?
When will this pandemic come to an end?
9 months now, we've been waiting, waiting for a solution, waiting for better times to come, times where we can all meet together celebrate freely and joyfully without fear.

We've waited through...
Lock down, times of significant isolation and social distancing.
We've waited as politicians have grappled with steering the difficult course of controlling the virus and keeping the economy going.
We've waited as we've seen friends and family struggle financially, mentally, physically and some even succumb to this virus during this period. Painful times.

I'm sure like me, many of you are tired, tired of it all, and perhaps beginning to lose hope?
I caught myself thinking the other day – what if this is the new norm? What if we just have to live with this virus?

Each day we pray. Each evening the prayer chain prays at 9pm for an end to the pandemic
Since the second lockdown the archbishops have encouraged us to pray and to pray and fast on Thursdays. Each day we have been praying expectantly for an effective vaccine to be developed.

And praise the Lord, a vaccine has been found and there are others being developed.
There will be an end. And thanks to effective communications we are able to understand much of the complexity of how this end will be achieved. That we may not get the vaccine this side of Christmas. And Yes, we may need multiple jabs
But knowing the vaccine is coming produces hope in our hearts. And so, we wait.
But now we wait with hope rather than despair.
The How long, becomes less important than the knowledge that an end will come.

In our Bible reading from the first book of Thessalonians, the new Christians there, were waiting. Waiting for the return of Jesus, the day of the Lord. They had been waiting expectantly for many years, but now in their waiting they were beginning to lose hope; they were becoming anxious. You see, they believed that Jesus would return, but their limited understanding meant that they thought he would return within their lifetime and when the first church members began to die, they became unsettled and anxious – what would happen to those who died before Jesus comes again? When O Lord, will you return was the cry of the Thessalonians. They needed to know. and Paul's letters to the Thessalonians are known as 'eschatological letters' because they teach us about what will happen when Jesus returns.

In our Matthew reading, we hear Jesus telling a parable, one in a series of parables, also about end times. Three servants entrusted with the wealth of the master who was away for a very long time. Three servants waiting for the return of the master.

How long, O Lord – has been a cry of our hearts for centuries...

It is hard to keep going in these difficult times, in these days of uncertainty.

But **both** our passages show us **how** to keep going. How to hold on to a sure and certain hope, but perhaps more than that, they show us how to flourish despite the difficult times because of that sure and certain hope.

But, firstly **we** need to understand more fully about Jesus' second coming...and I'm going to break that down into 2 areas

1. Our understanding of why Jesus has to return
2. Our view of Judgement Day

These are not easy areas but they are important...And then, finally I'll ask the 'so what' question...

3. So what difference does it make

Firstly, we need to understand why Jesus is coming back, why Jesus has to come back.

And it pivots on what we believe happens to us after we die...not a fun subject for a Sunday morning but the very subject the Thessalonians were grappling with.

Back then, there was a range of beliefs in pagan society about what happens after death from – death being a place of constant misery in the underworld.... to being a nothingness....many of the gravestones in Thessalonica had the word of Epicurus written on them....“I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care.” For many, death was the end ...and in their everyday life, they did what pleased themselves for they didn't care, they had nothing to hope for in the future, and so very little to give them any purpose in their lifetime. 'I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care.' Attitude shapes the whole way of living.

Today, we see a similar range of beliefs. I was talking to the attendant at the crematorium just last week. He said currently 90% of funerals are non-religious, how sad. I don't know if you've ever been to a humanist funeral, I have - they tried to make the best of saying good-bye – but it was dry, and lacking in any hope....

What do we believe? What does happen after we die?

In the previous chapter, chapter 4 Paul reassured the Thessalonians that Jesus said that believers who die are only “sleeping”. Chapter 4 Verses 13 reads...

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. '

We remember Jesus talking about Jairus daughter as sleeping and Lazarus who had been dead for 4 days he said *'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.'*

But what does it mean, to sleep in death?

Where **are** those who have fallen asleep? Where are our loved ones who have already died?

Do not they go straight to heaven to be with Jesus?

Well yes, and no – In Philippians ch 1 Paul talks about whether to remain on earth to do the work or whether it would be better to be killed and be with Jesus. In verse 23 of Philippians 1 he says *‘I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but...’*

So Paul is saying that Christians go immediately to be with Jesus.

At our house-group on Tuesday we heard in Revelation chapter 6, about the souls in heaven who were waiting for the judgement day. Souls of Christians already in heaven.

Then in 1 Corinthians 15: Verses 51-52 Paul says: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we (those who are still living) will be changed.*

Paul says Christians who die go immediately to be with Jesus in heaven. However, they don't receive their resurrection bodies, until God sounds the final trumpet on the last day.

Hear what it says at the end of Ch 4 of 1 Thessalonians...

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 for ever.’

We catch a glimpse of this in Matthew 27 – at the moment that Jesus died – *‘and the temple curtain was torn in two, the earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life’*...a glimpse of the power of the resurrection the power Jesus has over death....

It is a mystery, and any explanation is a human attempt to explain something far bigger. But we are assured of life with Jesus after death and it appears that we will get our full resurrection bodies when Jesus returns.

Are you with me so far?

And this makes sense – the Bible says we do go to heaven when we die but on the last day, those who have already died are gathered up and given new resurrection bodies and the bodies of those who are still alive are transformed.

There are details about this, glimpses of the glorious future we are promised - all over the Bible. Jesus is coming back to complete his re-creation.

Revelation chapters 21 & 22 writes of how we will come back down to earth with Jesus to enjoy his perfect re-creation.

Let's not be frightened of death. The frustrations and limitations of this life will be transformed. We will be with those we love, in the perfect harmony of relationships we long for today. We will be in the presence of Love himself. This is our Hope, our sure and certain hope. Praise the Lord.

Paul wants us to see that we have an eternal hope, and that real certain hope can be so contagious that it will help us to spread the Gospel all across the world.

As believers we grieve when our loved ones die, of course. (Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus and the early Christians mourned in Acts 8: 2) but our grief is for our own loss but those who die knowing Christ will not miss out on a share in Jesus' glory.

So we need to remember why Jesus is coming back

But, Paul says we must not get too obsessed about **when** it will happen. We have been in birth pangs for over 2000 years now. The when is NOT known to anyone, except God – even Jesus said he did not know...so let's not speculate. And so, we wait. But we wait, knowing it is coming.

Paul says that 'The day of the Lord' will come... It will come like a thief in the night - to those who do not believe. But for us, we already know we are living in in-between times, between Jesus's coming as a baby that first Christmas and his second coming, and that these days are like 'labour pains' which, like a pregnant woman will confirm are both inevitable and unavoidable. In other words, wars, earthquakes, pandemics are all signs of these in-between times.... All signs of end times, but at the end the birth pain, those labour pains, will give way to new life.

Our second point in our understanding of Judgement Day.

And this is a whole sermon in itself but let's take a brief look at the Matthew reading, the parable of the bags of gold is a picture... of Judgement Day.

Those who know and love God – are rewarded ...Well done you good and faithful servant...'Come and share your master's happiness' .

But the one who hid the money – did not know his master, he did not live to please him. The fact that he was scared of him shows that he did not know him. And the stark revelation here about those who don't know God is that they will be thrown into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Ouch...

Yes, God is God. He is all powerful and indeed can harvest and gather where he wills – but as Christians we know we live under grace, because of our belief in what Jesus accomplished for us on the Cross and therefore we escape God's wrath. 1 Thess 5 verse 9 confirms this. '*For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation.*' We may have to give an account of our lives but not in order to be saved – we are already saved by Jesus.

The Second Coming of Jesus will mark the harvest-day. He has delayed his second coming because Jesus does not want any to be lost.

2 Peter 3:9 *'But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.'* ⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come ...*

Our view of Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God.... reflects our understanding of him.

Sometimes we view Jesus just as the Suffering Servant. When he came as a baby, he hid his royal power in the unimpressive body. He was rejected and crucified so that "the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled". We thank God that he was a suffering servant.

But He was still the Mighty King, proving it to those who would listen through his miracles and his teaching. At his first coming he gave those who heard the option of believing... he never forced his rule.

And we still live in these days. Yes, we are 'chosen', we are 'set apart', we are 'saved' and it may seem to others that we think we are in an exclusive 'chosen club'. But Jesus offer is inclusive – all who turn to him will be saved.

But, my friends, he is coming back a second time, and the bible says that when he returns it will be in a very different manner from the first. He will come visibly, undisguisedly, and "on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory".

He will not come asking for volunteers, but gathering those who had already volunteered. And those who have rejected him, will perish. This is the bit we don't like to talk about but there are many accounts in the Bible about this. Jesus spoke of the separation of the sheep and goats, the gathering of the wheat and weeds and so on.

And so finally, to the So What!

We have an urgent role to share the Good News of Jesus....to draw people to the Hope that we have in that glorious day when things will be put right. Jesus doesn't want anyone to perish. We need people to hear about him. As it says in 1 Peter 3:16 *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...*

Brothers and sisters, as it says in our passage from Thessalonians...*you are children of light and children of the day. Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.* This clearly echoes back to Paul's letter to the Ephesians about the armour of God...but just see what the glorious armour is...The armour of God is

Firstly, Faith...faith in our Lord Jesus that he is real, faith that we believe he is the son of God, that he lived, he died, and he has risen again for the forgiveness of sins. Put on faith for all to see.

Secondly, Hope.... That real and certain hope in that glorious day when Jesus comes again. Let's make our armour of hope so contagious... When others see us stare death in the face and laugh because it doesn't have the final word – my friends it is contagious.

And thirdly, Love – Put on love, love for God and for one another and especially and most importantly love for the lost....

How are you going to share your faith this week?

Who are you going to share your hope with this week?

How are you going to show your love for the lost this week?

Verses 10-11 says *'He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another, build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.'*

As we wait,

Just as the hope for a successful vaccine lifts our spirits, that the end of this pandemic is in sight

Let's live a life of faith, hope and love, as our spirits are lifted by the truth of Jesus's glorious second coming when not only the Coronavirus will be eradicated but all suffering will end, and we will live in harmony with each other and the world.

Thanks be to God, Amen.