

Stand firm, hold fast.

It is a strange passage that we have read from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians this morning, a curious passage and it's not entirely clear what is going on. It seems that at the Church at Thessalonica people were convinced that Jesus was going to return soon. Jesus had risen from the dead and he'd ascended into heaven and the hope was that he would return soon to wrap things up, to put an end to history and bring about the new creation. This would be the Day of the Lord when evil would finally be banished and peace would reign and all would be well. But it wasn't happening and people in Thessalonica were getting concerned. Where was Jesus? Where was his return? From these verses it appears that some people may have thought that it had happened: the Day of the Lord had come, though it's not quite clear how, without anyone noticing.

Well, Paul writes to tell the church there that the end is not nigh. They should prepare themselves for the long haul. And furthermore there is trouble ahead as the world will yet be convulsed by evil and affliction and chaos. Paul talks about 'the rebellion' that is still to come. He talks about 'the lawless one' who will appear, exalting himself and declaring himself to be God and taking his seat in the temple of God. And we might wonder who this 'lawless one' might be. Only recently the bloodthirsty Roman Emperor Caligula, who was convinced of his own divinity, had ordered a huge statue of himself to be placed in the temple in Jerusalem to the fury of the Jews. Maybe something similar would happen again, so troubled times lay in store for Christ's church.

Now, the question I would like to ask this morning concerns what kind of world the people of Thessalonica were living in. What kind of world is disclosed by this passage? And what seems clear is that this is a world in which there is a struggle going on, a conflict between good and evil. It is a world in which this 'lawless one' is likely to appear at any time, a world that is subject to 'rebellion'. Or, to expand on that a bit, this is a world into which Christ has come. And in coming Christ has engaged head on with the power of evil that poisons and infects this world. And he has inflicted a decisive defeat upon the power of evil such that it's days are numbered. But the end is not yet. Although Christ's victory is certain and sure there remains a conflict in which evil is likely to strike viciously and maliciously at any time. Someone has used an

analogy from the last world war. There was a day known as D Day on June 6th 1944 when certain decisive landings and events took place and after that the outcome of the war was certain. Victory was secure. But that didn't mean that the war ended then and there. In fact some of the fiercest fighting was yet to come as a foe already decisively defeated threw everything it had into one last desperate fight. So likewise Christ on the cross won the decisive victory over evil. That was D Day in the history of the world. And the Day of the Lord will come when the full effects of that victory will finally be displayed in a new heavens and a new earth. But until then evil is likely to arise and to lash out in its terminal, dying death throes. And hence Caligula, and hence the lawless one and his rebellion, and hence Hitler and Stalin and Mao, and hence so-called Islamic State.

You see there are various versions of the history of the human race. There are those who argue that it is a history of progress, of the gradual perfecting of humankind. And then there is the version that Darwin gave us, of human history as the arena for a conflict between the weak and the strong, with the survival of the fittest. Christianity, however, pictures human history differently, as the arena for a conflict not between weak and strong but between good and evil. And evil has been decisively defeated by God in Jesus Christ but it is always liable to break out, thrashing around in its dying convulsions and causing terrible destruction.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa is someone who knows all about the power of evil, about the Caligulas of this world. Yet in the face of the monstrous apartheid regime Tutu composed a simple prayer:

Goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death.

Victory is ours, through him who loved us.

It's nice to think that goodness is stronger than evil. We cling to the hope that love is stronger than hate; light than darkness, life than death. But is it true? Will evil and death and darkness finally prevail?

This morning Christ comes and meets us at this table. Here he points us back to a night when he was betrayed and arrested and when it seemed that evil would prevail. But he also points us forward to the feast of the Kingdom, the feast of the new creation when goodness and love and light and life will be all

in all. In between times there is a struggle, a fierce struggle. But stand firm and hold fast: victory is ours through him who loved us. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
to you be all praise and honour and glory.
You – Creator God;
You – brother to us in Jesus Christ;
You – closer to us than breathing by your Spirit,

You – our companion at the table of bread and wine.

We praise you have come in Christ,
come into our world in all its pain and darkness,
and you have wrestled with the power of sin and evil
and have triumphed.

And we await your coming in glory when all will be made new.

Yet as we wait we confess our allegiance to
all that you came to destroy and defeat;
forgive us that we continue our adherence to the losing side;
forgive our captivity to things whose power over us
has been broken.

O God come to us now once again,

Come in forgiveness,

Come in grace,

Come in bread and wine and feed us with new life

That we may people who bear witness to the triumph

Of goodness, and love, and light and life.

We pray in Jesus' name and in his words

we pray together, saying...