

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:1-13

19.11.17

### *Wakefulness and Destiny*

It's probably the oldest document in the New Testament, Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to a Church that he had founded in a thriving seaport in northern Greece called Thessalonica. It precedes all his other letters and also the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. And it's not at first sight a particularly easy letter to relate to, for it seems that the concerns of those early Christians living all these centuries ago are quite different from ours today. One particular preoccupation seems to have been the belief in the immanent return of Christ. Jesus' earthly ministry had reached its climax with his physical departure from his followers – but with the promise that he would return, and there seems to have been much speculation that this would be soon. Some Christians, however, were getting twitchy. Some Christians were dying – people who believed that they would not taste death, for Jesus would return before that happened. So what was going on? And that is one of the concerns that Paul is addressing in this letter. That's why our chapter begins, 'Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...' Paul seems to have been saying in effect, 'you don't know how or when this thing will happen – no-one does – but live each day in the expectation that it could happen at any moment. Live life such that you would not be shamed or caught out if Jesus were to suddenly return!' And the image that Paul uses here is wakefulness. Don't let the Lord catch you sleeping when he returns! Don't be creatures of the night, asleep and unprepared: be awake and ready!

Well, that's all very well but it's not easy for us today to relate to this. I confess that my first thought each day when I get up is, 'maybe today the Lord will return – I'd better be on my best behaviour.' I cannot live on continual tiptoe in readiness for an end that may be nigh. 2000 years of the earth continuing its course uninterrupted can't help but dull our sense of anticipation. And it's not helped by the fact there continue to be regular warnings of the Lord's impending return and the end – folk are always predicting it. So how do we enter the world of the Thessalonians, a world lived on a knife-edge of expectation of the end and the rebirth of all things?

Well, reading through this passage with its stark imagery there are things that leap out at me and that seem to me to address us today as much as ever and I want firstly to revisit this image of wakefulness, of our calling to stay awake. As it says in verse 6, ‘So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and sober.’ What intrigues me about that image is that a life lived alert to God is pictured as one of wakefulness, while a life lived ignoring God is associated with sleep and, by implication, dreaming. And that appeals to me because it is usually the other way around. It is believers, people of faith, who are accused of living in a dream world, a fantasy world. I think of the great psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud who characterised religion as an illusion. In his key work on religion entitled ‘The Future of an Illusion’ he wrote that ‘religion is a system of wishful illusions with a disavowal of reality...’ In short, as believers, we are not living in the real world. We need to wake up to reality as it is and not as religion purports it to be. So think of the ‘illusory’ world that we live in as Christians. It is a world that is embraced by love, a world where Jesus Christ rules as Lord. And his realm breaks into this broken and failing world and will one day renew and replace it. And his rule is one of justice and peace and is characterised by grace and forgiveness. But this ‘illusory’ world is claimed by Christians to be the real world! It’s the world ruled by mammon and war and by the survival of the fittest that is illusory – it has no final grounding or reality. And conversion, the call to confess Christ as Lord and to follow him in discipleship is therefore a wakeup call, a summons to live in the real world that is even now dawning on this old world order.

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote powerfully in this vein. He wrote of ‘awakening to conversion’, stating that Christians ‘... are those who have woken up.’ So in Paul’s words here in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, Christians are ‘children of the light and children of the day.’ Conversion to Christ is a wake up call, but it’s one that needs constant repeating and renewing for we so easily fall back into the sleep of unreality, the sleep of the unreal world around us. So Karl Barth writes, ‘We cannot, therefore, define Christians simply as those who are awake while the rest sleep, but more cautiously as those who ... constantly stand in need of reawakening’ from ‘the sleep of all kinds of errors and fantasies and falsehoods.’ And this is a call that echoes from the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night of Jesus’ arrest, where the disciples slept instead of watching and waiting with him.

So we are called to awake, but what does it mean to be children of light and of the day, as Paul puts it in this passage? And here I am struck by another phrase in our reading which leaps out and resonates and it comes in verse 9, where Paul writes, 'For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.' Here is what we are awakened to and for – God had destined us not for wrath but for salvation through Christ. And it's that word 'destined' that intrigues me. You see one of the things that intrigues us today is our origins, where we have come from as human beings. Charles Darwin unfolded for us the story of evolution and how we emerged from the struggle for life. And scientists in recent times have discovered more and more about the origins of the universe and the Big Bang. Origins fascinate and astound us. But when it comes not to our origins but to our destiny – what lies ahead – things are a little less uplifting. Last week I mentioned the great scientist Stephen Hawking's recent prediction that a combination of overcrowding and energy consumption means that world only has 600 years left before it is engulfed by a ball of flame. This week there was more bad news. Back in 1992 1700 scientists issued a 'warning to humanity' about the environmental impact of pushing earth's eco-systems to breaking-point. Last Monday, to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the warning, 15,000 scientists from 184 countries issued an update, warning that humanity has failed to make sufficient progress and that things are getting worse, with global temperatures rising by over half a degree since 1992 and carbon dioxide emissions increasing by 62%. And there is Paul in our reading saying in verse 3, 'when they say, 'there is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape.' Is this our fate?

Well, here I would suggest that there is a distinction to be made between fate and destiny. You see, fate represents all the myriad of forces and influences that mould and shape and direct us. Fate is what seems to dictate and determine our lives with an inevitability that is inescapable. So people say things like, 'it seems to be my fate always to mess up relationships;' 'it seems my fate always to be caught in the rain without a raincoat'. It just seems like my life is decreed that way – it's fate. And increasingly it seems that the human race and human history are fated to end badly. It's the way things are and the way things are going to be – and we can't do much about it. And so ultimately, we are fated with destruction – whether it's in 600 years or sooner or later. Our

fate is unavoidable. Destiny, however, is something different. Destiny has the power to overcome fate. Destiny calls us from the future, drawing us but not compelling us. Destiny does not dictate but it works with us, able to redeem even our worst mistakes and failures. Where fate shuts history down destiny opens it up to new possibility. Where fate is freighted with fear, destiny has love at its heart. So Paul says here these great, sublime words: ‘God has destined us not for wrath but for salvation...’

I don’t know what you make of God’s wrath. People don’t like to think of an angry God. We contrast God’s wrath with God’s love and we affirm only the latter. Well, I disagree. When God sees what is going on in Myanmar at the moment, the ethnic cleansing, is God not angry? What kind of a God wouldn’t be? When we see what’s happening in Yemen, the pitiful plight of starving children, I’m angry – why shouldn’t God be? When God sees species of beautiful creatures annihilated by human madness, what kind of God would not be angry? Well, I’ll tell you what kind of a God would not be angry – a God who didn’t care, an apathetic, indifferent God: in other words an unloving God, for God’s wrath is but the other side of God’s love. So God’s wrath is bound up with all our self-destructive, deathly habits. God’s anger is provoked by our violence, our inability to live at peace. It is aroused by our folly that threatens God’s beloved world. But listen again: God has destined us not for wrath but for salvation. Because of Christ the destruction to which we seem fated is not the last word. Christ transforms fate into destiny, and our destiny is salvation. Love wins.

I’ve recounted before the story of the young soldier out on the Western Front in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, looking at the hell and the mayhem around him and saying simply, ‘we were not meant for this!’ We were not meant for violence destruction. Creation is not meant to end in nuclear winter or ecological devastation. It’s not our final destiny. And I would be provocative and say that only the Christian faith allows us to say that. Without faith in Christ we are left in the hands of fate and God knows where that seems to be taking us. But Christ transforms fate into destiny and so there is hope.

The church at Thessalonica may have been waiting expectantly for Jesus’ return. We find it hard to live with their urgency and expectation. But the call to them to wake up comes to us too. Wake up to conversion. Wake up to Christ as Lord. Wake up to the real world of his realm. And then live up to your destiny, to what you are meant for: not wrath, but salvation. Amen.

Awake my soul, awake my soul  
and praise my Creator, my Maker.  
Almighty and loving God, we do awaken today  
to a beautiful world fashioned and crafted  
by your hand, a world of wonder and delight;  
and we awaken to your love that has reached  
out to us in Jesus Christ and crowned us with  
worth and value;  
and we awaken to a world destined to find its end  
and fulfilment through your faithfulness to it.  
God we praise you, holy, eternal and gracious one.  
Forgive us, however, that while you awaken us to a new day  
we are so often creatures of the night,  
choosing darkness over light.  
Forgive us that while you have made us for life,  
we choose the things that make for death.  
Forgive us that we fall far short of your goal  
and purpose for us.  
Hear us, we pray, as we confess our sins and failures,  
seeking your forgiveness,

O loving God, whose last word is salvation and grace,  
assure us we pray of your faithfulness to us.  
Assure us that through Jesus Christ we are forgiven  
and grant that through the work of your Holy Spirit in us  
we may change and be transformed in the people you  
have created and destined us to be.  
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words we pray together,  
saying...