

BEING HOPEFUL AND READY

1 THESSALONIANS 4: 13-18

MATTHEW 25: 1-13

It was 1984, and the place was the railway station of the city of Thessalonika, in Greece. The time was 11 o'clock at night, and I and many others had been on the platform for 5 hours already. A single sign was displayed and kept us going. It said simply TO TRAINO ISTAMBOULOU KATHUSTERESE, the train from Istanbul is delayed. By that time I should have already arrived in Athens, but instead I faced a 5 hour journey through the night!

It was a very long wait. Only the sign gave us continued hope that the train would eventually come – which it did, at half past midnight.

During Paul's second missionary journey, he went to Thessalonika and began preaching in the Jewish Synagogue there. From Paul's successful ministry there, a young Christian church developed, consisting of both Jews and Greeks. After Paul left Thessalonika the young church suffered persecution and a lack of strong leaders, despite their lively faith. They needed encouragement and hope, and that's why Paul wrote letters to them.

The Thessalonians wanted answers to two questions. First, when will Christ return in Glory, as was expected soon by all Christians? Second, what happens to the Christians who die before Christ returns?

Paul deals with these questions in his first letter to the Thessalonians, part of which we have heard read today. Essentially, Paul encourages the Thessalonians in having the virtue of Hope – rather like me on the platform waiting in hope for that train in Thessalonika.

What is hope? Or rather, what is Christian hope? Ultimately, I suggest, Christian hope is having the conviction that the future is God's future – not determined by what has happened in the past, or by what is being done in the present! God's future.

Through the science of Physics, we think, we think we know all about the nature of time. Physics tells us that time has a direction from past to present to future. Until 2011, that is! For this year the world of Physics has been turned upside down by the discovery that tiny particles called Neutrons have been repeatedly measured to travel faster than the speed of light, which Einstein said was impossible! If this is true, then all the Physics textbooks will need to be ripped up, as one Professor of Physics has said. If this is true, then our understanding of the nature of time itself

will need to be revised. If this is true, then time's arrow can be reversed, such that the future can influence the past!

If the future is God's future, the Hope means living now in the presence and the power of God's future! And so the Last Things can influence what happens now! And faith means assurance that our Christian Hope will happen!

Let's return to the questions posed by the Thessalonians to Paul. If Christ's return is delayed then what happens to those who have died in the meantime? Are they gone forever?

Paul's answer is that Death is to be understood as departure and not loss, which is the basis of the Church's annual commemoration of All Souls, during this Season of Remembrance. Paul is confident of his answer for two reasons; because the survival of death is guaranteed both by the Resurrection of Jesus, and by the Return of Jesus on the Last Day, the Day of the Messiah, the Day of Resurrection.

Going out, or going up, to meet the Lord before he arrives is part of the imagery of the Parable of the Bridesmaids we've heard today. It's a middle eastern custom that a Great Man is met by officials on his journey

before he gets to the City he is visiting. It's a middle eastern tradition that the Bridegroom is met by the Bridesmaids as he processes to his parents' house, - followed by the Wedding Feast.

If we assume that the Parable of the Bridesmaids is actually about the Second Coming of Jesus, then there are several points for us to note. The characters are these: Jesus is the Bridegroom, and those alive at the time of the Second Coming are the Bridesmaids.

In the tradition, the Bridegroom could arrive at the Wedding anytime, so the Bridesmaids had to expect delay, but also needed to be ready and equipped to go out and meet him.

The equipment needed was an oil-filled lamp that was in good working order, ready for an extended wait. The purpose of the lamps was to light the Bridegroom on the way to his Wedding, which means that the Bridesmaids themselves were human torches for the Bridegroom's procession. In other words, those who meet Christ at the Second Coming must be themselves like lamps, people already burning for God, burning with Faith and Hope, and Love of God and Neighbour! That's what it means to be ready!

We tend to think of the Second Coming, the Day of the Lord, as a time of Judgement. While that's true, as emphasised by the Book of Revelation and the Old Testament Prophets, the Parable of the Bridesmaids suggests a more balanced picture. A Marriage, followed by a Wedding Feast, is all about joyful celebration rather than judgement. We must welcome, not fear, the coming of Jesus, even though we must expect it, and be ready for it, anytime.

I conclude with these words of the Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths:

“Jesus left the disciples with the promise that he would return, and that this returning would be the End of the World. We need to remind ourselves that our destiny is not in this World as it is. We have to be prepared to go beyond death. We have to die to this World, and everything in it, to find the reality which does not change. When Christ appears in Glory it will not be in any way we can now conceive, as we ourselves must die to ourselves in order to become part of the New Creation.”

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Dean of Chester November 2011