

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 2nd Sunday before Advent

15th November 2020

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Sometimes with the readings in our lectionary there are obvious connections. I am not sure the linkages are that obvious in today's readings and I hope I am not trying to force fit them just because I want to talk about the day of the Lord or the end times.

Beginning with our psalm we learn of the infinite nature of God and the finite nature of us humans. In our OT reading we learn about the coming day of the Lord when God will exercise judgement on his chosen people and having found them wanting, will cleanse the earth of them. In our epistle, Paul talks about another day of the Lord but this is the day of the return of Jesus to this earth when He too will come with both judgement and redemption. Both our epistle and gospel readings tell believing Christians what we should be doing in anticipation and preparation for the return of Jesus. In the epistle we are told to walk in faith, hope and love and to encourage each other. In our gospel we are told to use the talents we have been given for the growth of God's kingdom here on earth.

So, let us look in more detail at each of our readings. Psalm 90 lays our base foundation. We have a God; one God and He is eternal; from everlasting to everlasting. In contrast we are like new grass in the morning that fades away by the evening. From dust we came and to dust we return. We may live 70 or 80 years in between. But instead of being depressed by this disparity, we can be encouraged from the outset as we are reminded that God is our eternal home. As Isaac Watts wrote in the hymn that we sang last week and which is based on Psalm 90: O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home. By the way, Isaac Watts called the first part of his hymn, "man frail, God eternal".

From here we can go to Zephaniah who mentions 'the day of the Lord' more than any other prophet. In the OT the day of the Lord is the day when God renders His ultimate judgment bringing final deliverance or doom. In the New Testament the day of the Lord is the triumphant day of Christ's return to earth in glory but more of that later. Zephaniah is referring to God's impending

judgment on the nation of Judah. The people of Judah had long since turned their backs on God, not only in their personal lives but also in their worship. The depth of their sin indicated the need for God's people to be purged on their path to restoration. Though the judgement Zephaniah prophesies is brutal, he makes clear that God will bring this justice because He is passionate about protecting and rescuing His world from evil. God loves His creation so much that He seeks to purify rather than destroy us. Only then can He bring restoration and create a new Jerusalem for His faithful remnant. I don't think you need my help to recognise what is true of so much that we read in the OT that has relevance and application far beyond the world and times that the prophets lived in right up to the world we live in in the 21st. century. We have been warned.

From there we step into the NT with Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians and Matthew's gospel. Both readings come with the certainty of the Lord's return. It isn't a question of whether Jesus will return to this earth. Both readings take that for granted and focus more on what we should be doing in preparation for Christ's return.

As an aside, I must say that I am like Paul in one regard, (probably one regard only), and that is in his desire to be with the Lord. (Philippians 1:23) I look forward to the day that Christ will return and cleanse this world from the sin and evil that sometimes feels so overwhelming; to the time that God's will will be done on a renewed earth as it is in heaven. I look forward to the transformed bodies that we shall have; physical bodies with different properties, incorruptible bodies that will be animated by God's spirit unlike our current bodies which are animated by the normal soul (Quoting Tom Wright).

But back to Paul who starts this passage saying don't even bother trying to guess when Jesus will return. His coming will be as unexpected as that of a thief in the night. However, we Christians should not be surprised. We should be prepared for Christ's return as Jane reminded us last week.

Here Paul says we should be alert and self-controlled not drunk and incapable. Paul goes on to say we should equip ourselves with three things: faith, love and hope. Paul says wear them like armour for they will indeed protect us at all times. We can also think about them as a uniform, like the jersey of a sport's team that identifies whose team we are on – serving the God of Jesus Christ. This triad of faith, love and hope is referred to often in the NT. You know well that faith is 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1) Faith is not only belief but it includes trust, living trust that says we are prepared to act on what we believe. I don't need to define love, the

greatest of these three. Which leaves hope. Hope is not unfounded, wishful thinking but firm confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ and his return. It is the true sense of the anticipation of certainty so that we can live in the present with that anticipation. It is not chance or probability but the certain expectation that God's promises will be fulfilled. Amen.

And Paul concludes this passage with the words 'therefore encourage one another and build each other up' – just as you are doing now by your very presence in this service and coming to worship together virtually when we cannot do so in person.

And so, to our gospel reading which places another requirement on us in this time between Christ's resurrection and His return. Like all the parables in these two chapters of Matthew, it exemplifies the certainty of the Lord's coming. There are problems aplenty in interpreting the metaphors in this parable, not least identifying God with the master, but setting this and other problems aside, this parable suggests that readiness for Christ's return involves active service on the believer's part. Christians, who because of laziness or lack of conviction, refuse to use the gifts God has given us for His work will encounter a judging Christ when He returns. As believers, we are challenged to emulate our Master by using all that God has given us for the sake of the kingdom.

In this parable the owner of a large estate went on a journey for an unspecified period. He called three servants to him and gave them, disproportionately, the management of his property. Although the first servant received five times as much as the last, each received a significant sum of money. Jesus might have been using some hyperbole in the amounts He mentioned as the first servant received an astronomical amount. Even the last servant received an amount equivalent to twenty years' wages.

The return of the master is certain, but the timing is unknown. He returns eventually and enquires what each servant has done with his property. The first two servants have used what they have been given wisely but the third servant sat on what he was given and did nothing with it. The first two servants were judged faithful having done what the master required of them. The master commends them for being good and faithful, gives them more authority, and invites them to enter his "joy".

The third servant is not so fortunate. He knows his master wants to expand his estate and that his master does whatever he can to make his wealth grow. His

master reprimands the servant for doing nothing with what he was given saying that he could at least have invested the money with the bankers so that he might have gained some interest at least – a practice which is forbidden in scripture by the way. ‘If you could not do anything with what you have been given at least give it to somebody who could do at least a little with it’ seems to be the message.

The master is furious. He had entrusted this servant with a portion of his property in order that the servant would use his abilities – abilities that had helped the master in the past. Perhaps the servant, was too afraid to take a risk – even though risky behaviour was part of the master's business. Are you starting to get the message?

In the end the servant’s unfaithfulness to carry on the master's work cost him severely. The master expected his servants to continue his business, to take risks, and to emulate his behaviour.

In Matthew's gospel faithfulness is depicted as emulating the ministry of Jesus. Jesus announced the arrival of God's kingdom here on earth by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least. All who would follow Jesus are to tell others the good news of the kingdom and do the work that the master has called us to do. This work includes visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and feeding the hungry. Those who are found faithful may hear their Master when He returns say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

So, in summary, we are not to worry about when Christ’s return will happen because we do not know when that will be. We are not to worry about how it will happen or what will happen as we are told little and understand less about these things. We do know why Christ will return and we should reflect on that but our attention, resources, time and talents would be better spent making sure we are prepared for His return. And here is the closing challenge: have you identified what talent God has given you for the building of His kingdom here on earth and if so, are you using it fully? We all have been given talents of some description and I caution you should you think that you have not a talent or the talent you have is very small, for remember, it was the servant who was given the least that was you can finish the sentence.

Amen.