2nd Sunday before Advent (Year A)



‘Stay awake!’

I wonder if you have ever found it hard to stay awake? Perhaps you didn’t manage to get enough sleep the night before or maybe had been overexerting yourself physically. When we find ourselves in this situation, it seems that no matter how hard we try to keep our eyes open, they just want to firmly close shut to allow us to sleep.

A few years ago, when I was serving as a Liaison Officer in Sarajevo, Bosnia I went to bed extremely tired after a particularly busy day and fell into a deep sleep. That night the duty watch received an urgent signal that required immediate action. In the absence of the CO, I was the officer in charge. The Sergeant Major was dispatched to my room to fetch me. He initially tried calling out to me; however I was wearing earplugs at the time, as it was frequently noisy at night. Failing to rouse me, he eventually had to resort to rigorously shaking me ‘Wake up Sir!’ Whilst it was probably not the ideal way to be awoken from a deep sleep - it worked and fortunately I was able to immediately respond to the situation in hand. It was however a salutary lesson that when you are working in a theatre of war, it is vital to remain vigilant and alert at all time for the unexpected can occur at anytime.

In today’s lesson from 1 Thessalonians Paul is writing to encourage recent Christian converts in Thessalonica who found themselves in the midst of hardship and persecution with little external support. He wrote: ‘the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night’ (5:2). This term can be found in both the Old and New Testaments and has a range of meanings from a military invasion, the capture of a city and the ensuing suffering of its inhabitants to the first and second coming of Christ and the final judgement.

Any peace and security that the Christians in Thessalonica had been experiencing had been suddenly and unexpectedly destroyed. Therefore Paul tells them that as 'children of light' (5:5) it was imperative that they kept awake and alert and remained sober' (5:6) so that they could respond to the situation immediately and appropriately. He used military imagery to encourage them to put on the appropriate spiritual protection – the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of hope and salvation (5:8); items that would help protect their heart and minds. Like soldiers, they were to remain a fixed formation and encourage and build each other up (5:11) in the midst of their trials and tribulations.
Today's Old Testament reading from the book of Zephaniah likewise describes 'the day of the Lord'. However, this text was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. It is a poetic utterance describing in vivid apocalyptic imagery what would ensue. Today's reading begins with a call for the people to 'be silent' (1:7) - essentially stop what they were doing, shut up and be still – why, because they are in the presence of Almighty God. It was an ominous silence that would precede God's judgement. It goes on to document the distress, destruction and devastation that would follow.

Finally, in our gospel reading - the Parable of the Talents we find Jesus' teaching on how as children of the Kingdom of God we should live, as we await the 'day of the Lord' and the return of Christ. St Matthew's Gospel was written around 50 AD. Its largely Jewish recipients were likewise living through a period of turmoil and change and faced an uncertain future. Despite the harsh ending, the parable is a message of encouragement to Christians not to be lazy and slothful but rather active, alert and trustworthy as we prepare for the second coming of Christ. It encourages us to use our time and talents wisely and invest in Kingdom values that will see life and growth.

Whilst it would be foolish for me to compare the times that we are currently as the 'day of the Lord', we are unquestionably in the midst of a period of international turmoil and uncertainty. Today's readings give us hope and encouragement as to how as Christians we might respond and live our lives – awake, active and alert. Prepared and ready to respond to the unexpected especially the Christ the Master's return; may we each hear and respond so that we too may hear the Master say these words to us: 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (25:21). Amen.

Rev Andrew Jacobson
14th November 2020