

Second Sunday before Advent: 2020

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25. 14-30

The end is in sight. News this week about the success of the Pfizer BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine has been warmly welcomed, with results from other advanced trials expected soon. News of a vaccine provides hope that the end of this pandemic really is in sight, although hurdles still remain in terms of distribution and access. The end is in sight, but there is still a great deal of waiting and hoping and living to do in the meantime.

The Judeo-Christian tradition offers much wisdom about waiting and hoping and living whilst the end is in sight. From Noah, waiting for the flood to end; to Abraham and Sarah, waiting for a child, through to the context of our first reading, as the people of Thessalonica waited in hope for the return of Christ to restore and renew all things, a faith-based perspective on the world is rooted in the spiritual practice of waiting—of inhabiting the spiritual space of the now and not yet. We are counting down to Advent, an entire season of waiting, which will take on new resonance this year as we wait with renewed hope for better times to come.

Returning to the context of our first reading, it seems clear that the people of Thessalonica had grown weary with waiting and were struggling to stay the course. Waiting is tough, and encouragement is essential, as Paul makes clear: ‘encourage one another, and build up each other’. I think the mood of our second lockdown is also one of weariness—which is why the encouragement offered by news of a vaccine, a way out, has provided such a necessary boost to our national and global mood.

As we approached the first lockdown back in March, one of the most insightful spiritual reflections I heard came from an interview in newsnight with former chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who sadly died last Saturday. Rabbi Sacks—surely one of the greatest religious thinkers of our time—spoke of the coronavirus pandemic as a moment of spiritual awakening—a time to wake up, a time to recognize what is wrong with our world and our human nature, and to correct it; and also a time to recognize all that is good: the instincts of care and love and sacrifice that have been revealed; and now, in this second lockdown, the intelligence, creativity and dedication which has led scientists to develop groundbreaking vaccines in record time.

This spiritual attitude of ‘wakefulness’ is one we should continue to cultivate as we wait with the end of the pandemic closer in sight. This is how Paul approaches his pastoral letter to the Thessalonians who had grown weary with waiting. The end is in sight—Christ will return—but rather than asking ‘when is the end?’ the question seems to be: ‘what do we do in the meantime?’. In reply, Paul encourages an attitude of wakefulness, just as Rabbi Sacks encouraged—‘let us keep awake’, they both urge.

The concept of wakefulness has two overlapping dimensions in this passage, connected to the theme of light and day. First, the passage makes clear that the source of our wakefulness is Christ, whose saving death and resurrection ushers in a new day—a new era—enabling us to be children of light and children of the day. Isaac of Ninevah, Seventh Century Bishop and theologian refers to Christ simply as ‘the day’—the one whose peaceful light dawns on the world, bringing new perspective and hope. I believe the light of Christ is dawning even through this difficult time, awakening us to see divine love revealed in the care and compassion of so many; awakening us to see divine wisdom revealed in the scientific research to develop vaccines; and, more negatively, exposing the evil in our world—of inequality of health outcomes according to race and deprivation; of the lack of truthfulness and humility shown by some in government. The light of Christ is waking us up and we must maintain this attitude of wakefulness even if the end is now closer in sight—‘let us keep awake’.

The second aspect of wakefulness is the status it gives to all those who live in faith. Simply put, wakefulness is about conversion: not just our initial awakening to faith, or noticing the light of Christ for the first time, but a continual process of reawakening to faith throughout our lives. Refusing to let fear overcome us; refusing to hide our light from the world and retreat into self-centeredness, like the poor slave in the parable. The act of burying our gifts in the ground represents so much about what can go wrong in a human life—it suggests an attitude of fear and distrust, of apathy; of not caring enough; not living up to our full created potential. Sleepwalking our way through the world and banishing ourselves to darkness. The life of faith—of continual conversion—gives us a renewed sense of responsibility for the way we use our precious gift of life: to reach high, to love and care deeply; to share the treasures of our faith with others, especially as we wake up to the fact that many in public life do not seem to understand the importance of a life of faith and the communal practices that shape it—relegating public worship to a leisure activity or lifestyle choice. This is less a criticism of our government than a wake up call to us not to take our faith for granted and certainly not to bury it in the ground; but to reveal the relevance of its light to this new world that is dawning. ‘Let us keep awake’.

The end is in sight, but there is still a great deal of waiting and hoping and living to do in the meantime. After Paul’s instruction for the Thessalonian church to encourage one another and build one another up, he offers his own words of encouragement to live out the virtues of the Christian life: be at peace with one another, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient, do not repay evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another; rejoice always; pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances’. May these words encourage us today as we strive to keep awake, to keep faithful, and to wait and hope and live with the end in sight. Amen.

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