

## Living in Expectancy

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 05 June 2016

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

[MW16-19]

In our Wednesday morning Bible Study we are looking at Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

- so I thought it would be a good opportunity to share some of that in a couple of sermons
- this week's study title was: "Living in Expectancy: Death is not the end" which included thinking about what happens when people die with a major focus on the return of Jesus Christ

There's a story I really like about the return of Jesus ...

A Papal aide sees Jesus riding a donkey across St Peter's Square in Rome. He rushes to the Pope and says breathlessly, "Its-a the Lord. He's-a returned. He's-a returned. He's riding a donkey across the square on his way here. What do we do? What do we do?"

The Pope rubs his chin thoughtfully for a moment and then replies: "Look-a busy! Look-a busy!"

Now I'm taking a bit of a leap here and assuming we all believe Jesus will indeed return?

- okay, so who thinks Jesus is coming back tomorrow ... ?  
what about next week ... ?  
next month? next year???
- who knows when Jesus is going to return?

It's pretty obvious to us that Jesus could come back tomorrow or next week

- but he most probably won't  
so we are used to living between the resurrection and Christ's return
- but those first followers of Jesus  
the ones who were part of what we now call "the early church"  
were not

This included the believers in Thessalonica, who Paul is writing to

- these first early followers of Jesus thought Jesus return was imminent that Jesus was coming back tomorrow, or at least next week
- they fully expected Jesus to return in their lifetime  
this is the "expectancy" they were living in
- Paul noted in Chapter 1, verse 10  
*"... you are waiting for God's Son Jesus to come from heaven. God raised him from death, and on the day of judgement Jesus will save us from God's anger."*

Because of this, some of the Thessalonian church members had given up their jobs

- others were worried about what would become of relatives and friends who had already died before Jesus' return
- so in his letter Paul takes these concerns very seriously and tries to explain what would happen when the Lord returned as well as giving instruction on how to live in the meanwhile

At the end of Chapter 4, Paul writes these words of assurance and hope

- in verse 14 he says:

*We believe that Jesus died and was raised to life. We also believe that when God brings Jesus back again, he will bring with him all who had faith in Jesus before they died*

Paul emphasises that all people

- whether living or in the grave  
who put their faith in Christ will be with Him for eternity
- at the end of Chapter 4 Paul writes:  
*From that time on we will all be with the Lord forever.  
Encourage one another with these words.*

We, like the believers in Thessalonica, are a community founded on hope

- a hope for the future, about 'what happens next'  
that enables us to live in the present
- we have a hope for the future that makes a difference for life now  
but not everyone shares that hope

I have two very graphic memories in relation to this:

- a friend who I went through university with, and shared philosophy courses with  
believed that this life was it, you live then you die and that is it  
it did not bother him, that was just the way it was
- the other is one of the first funerals I took as a curate in Taupo  
a woman at the graveside in inconsolable grief  
because her husband was dead and buried and gone forever
- she had no hope that she would ever see him again  
no hope that there was a loving Saviour who would walk with her  
and guide her husband through this dark valley

We are not like that, we have hope

- hope that we will not be alone in the 'valley of the shadow of death'  
hope that those who have died before us continue their relationship with Jesus
- because we know Jesus promises to be with us and them  
in life, in death, in life beyond death

We also have the expectation, again like those in the church at Thessalonica

- that Jesus will return  
and ever since Jesus was "taken up into a cloud" and hidden from view  
there has been speculation about when and how he would come back ...
- all through history into our own time  
people have made predictions, looked for signs  
tried to identify world events with the coming of the end of the world
- sometimes with tragic consequences

In doing this people seem to have forgotten or overlooked what Jesus himself said:

- *No one knows the day or the time. The angels in heaven don't know, and the Son himself doesn't know. Only the Father in heaven knows.* (Mark 13:32)
- Bible scholar William Barclay has very strong words response:  
this did not stop people speculating about it, as indeed they still do, although it is  
surely almost blasphemous that people should seek for knowledge which was  
denied even to Jesus

Paul himself writes

- *I don't need to write to you about the time or date when all this will happen* (5:1)  
so if we do not know and are not to speculate about "when"  
what do we know and what are we to do?
- Paul wishes people to know that the Lord's return will be like ...  
and he gives two images, can you recall them???

[space for thinking/answers]

- the Lord's return will be like a thief coming in the night and come as suddenly as the pains of a woman about to give birth

We spent some time considering that at Bible study last Wednesday

- and found it interesting that Paul, never married and not a father would use the image of labour pains
- as someone said, "what would he know about giving birth?" but we also conceded that it can be just like that
- a woman can have her 'baby bag' all packed and ready for the delivery suite and contractions can begin while she's out shopping with the carefully prepared bag at home by the front door!
- even with all our modern medical knowledge and equipment it is not possible to say exactly when a baby will be born

But we also thought that the image of labour pains and childbirth

- applied very appropriately to the Lord's return in bringing in a new age after the pain and effort of childbirth there is a new life
- after the trial and trouble caused by the Lord returning there will be a new beginning for all creation

William Barclay writes about the 'Day of the Lord' and the 'Second Coming':

There was the present age which is wholly and incurably bad. There was the age to come which would be the Golden Age of God. In between was the Day of the Lord which would be a terrible day. It would be a day in which one world was shattered and another was born ... its main characteristics were as follows. (i) It would come suddenly and unexpectedly. (ii) It would involve a cosmic upheaval in which the universe was shaken to its very foundations. (iii) It would be a time of judgement.

That is what we are able to "know", so what are to "do"?

- Paul tells the Thessalonians, and by implication, us that we are to live in the light and shine the light to show the way for others
- part of living expectantly is to have hope to know where we are going and that our relationship with Jesus continues in this life and the life to come
- living out of this hope is shining the light of Christ here and now

Hope that shines in the words of a poem sometimes read at funerals

- you may be familiar with it, it goes like this:

A ship sails and I stand watching till she fades on the horizon  
and someone at my side says She is gone.

Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all.

She is just as large now as when I last saw her.

Her diminished size and total loss from my sight is in me, not in her.

And just at that moment, when someone at my side says she is gone,  
there are others who are watching her coming over their horizon  
and other voices take up a glad shout - There she comes!

Paul also writes that we are to be awake and alert

- which I would kind of paraphrase by saying we are not only to "look busy" but be busy with the Lord's business of loving God and loving our neighbour
- to help and encourage each other, being channels of grace and peace shining with the light of Christ
- wherever we happen to be, whoever we happen to be with

Jesus did not want us to put time and energy into wondering when and how he would return

- rather he wanted us to 'get on with the job' which is what Paul tells the church in Thessalonica
- to get on with living as followers of Jesus and sharing the love and grace God has given us in Jesus

For me "living in expectancy" involves two things

- knowing the hope we have in Jesus and being ready
- living each day as if Jesus is in the midst of it and leaving no loose ends

An old farmer on his death bed was being read some comforting sayings

- to which he replied: "I thatched my house when the weather was warm" if a call comes suddenly it need not find us unprepared
- a person who has lived their life with Christ is never unprepared to enter his nearer presence

I invite you to reflect on living expectantly, "looking busy" and being awake and alert as I read this poem by Richard Baxter

From valley to valley out over the hilltops,  
From sunshine to fog like the darkest of night;  
So we follow the Lord down life's winding pathway,  
And walk much by faith and little by sight.

'Twould be easy to see were His presence like lightning,  
And easy to hear if like thunder His voice;  
But He leads in the quiet by the voice of the Spirit,  
And we follow in love for we've made Him our choice.

The path that we tread by the cross is o'er shadowed,  
And the glory at times by pain is made dim;  
Temptations assail and the spirit grows weary,  
Yet we're ever sustained by the vision of Him.

The years of our lives be they few or be many,  
Will soon pass away as dreams of the night;  
Then we'll step through the portals on eternity's morning,  
And greet Him in glory as faith turns to sight.

To conclude, let us pray the first prayer on page 595 of our Prayer Books  
[Eternal Father ...]