

Second Sunday before Advent (OT33) Year A 2020

Many will know that I have a sad penchant for disaster movies and spectaculars – the more preposterous the better. So when I read the readings through for this Sunday, several films came to mind. In turn, any of the ‘Lord of the Rings’ films (with their great computer-generated battle scenes) and Zephaniah is sorted out. Then the film, ‘Knowing,’ – an apocalyptic smörgåsbord - which fits in with Paul’s First Letter to Thessalonians. I had thought of the Harry Potter films for the dark nature of the Parable of the Talents, but then real-life kicked in, and we have to look no further for weeping and gnashing of teeth than No 10 Downing Street at present! All sorted.

However, flippancy aside, both Zephaniah and Paul talk powerfully of the Day of the Lord. For Zephaniah, it was to be *a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities. Dies iræ, dies illa.* Zephaniah prophesied around the same time as Jeremiah and sought to point people towards God before catastrophe fell – ultimately the Fall of Jerusalem and the entire nation. When it came, it must have seemed like the end of the world for the Jewish people – certainly as they knew it. Where was God in this? Was it the Day of the Lord because of their wickedness?

History is littered with people who have predicted the end of the world as we know it – more often than not expressed in religious terms. From Hilary of Poitiers to Martin of Tours, Martin Luther to Christopher Columbus, John Wesley to the television evangelist and presidential hopeful, Pat Robertson; all these and hundreds besides have predicted that the end is nigh. Yet I think it is probably safer to remember the words of Jesus himself: ‘No one knows when that day and hour will come—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son; the Father alone knows.’ (Matt 24:36) If Jesus doesn’t know, how can anyone else?

At the same time, Saint Paul was confident that Jesus **would** return, writing to the Thessalonians, ‘You yourselves know very well that the Day of the Lord will come as a thief comes at night. When people say, ‘Everything is quiet and safe,’ then suddenly destruction will hit them! It will come as suddenly as the pains that come upon a woman in labour’ (1 Thess 5:2-3). This description of the Day of the Lord returning like a thief may seem rather strange, yet in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus uses similar imagery of catching of people off guard when he said, ‘Know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’ (Luke 12:39-40).

When we think of thieves, we perhaps might think of situations where we know someone who has been burgled, or we have experienced it ourselves. There is the sense that someone has entered our inner sanctum in an unwelcome way – touching those deeply personal belongings which we treasure. There is a sense of violation. We have all heard of people in such situations who never feel comfortable in their own homes again.

So speaking of Jesus as a thief seems so contrary to what we tend to believe about him. How many stained-glass windows, carvings or paintings have you seen depicting Jesus

climbing through an open window on a dark night looking over his shoulder to make sure no one notices what he's up to?

Yet this is exactly why Jesus himself and the apostles uses such imagery. They do it to catch our attention: As our Liturgy proclaims: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. As I said last week, we are called to live expectant lives, lives where we should be prepared to welcome Jesus in person at any moment. This is part of our identity as Christians. In doing so, the Day of the Lord is actually upon us.

The First Letter of Peter also talks about the Day of Judgement: *The end of all things is near; therefore, be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, **serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.** (1 Peter 4:7-10).* Did you notice that reference to using gifts – talents - to the best purpose we can?

When I was contemplating the Parable of the Talents, it struck me that although it is generally interpreted as a call to develop such gifts as we might have on different fronts, it actually represents a much more profound call to each of us as brothers and sisters in Christ. Yes, we all have potential to discover and develop those areas of our lives where we might indeed have talents, but the parable is actually calling us to make the most of the **greatest** treasure we possess - the mercy and grace which is ours through faith in Jesus Christ. We share in the very life of God through faith, and each one of us is called to grow and share this gift, living Gospel-centred lives.

Paul points out that we should be praying, loving, caring without complaining, working for the good of others, telling people about salvation in Christ, and using the fire of our love to lead people to Christ through active love and service. Lack of involvement, lives so crowded (even in this season of pandemic) that we end up ignoring the Spirit's call to grow through God's Word and Sacraments; failing to share fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ leads ultimately to a spiritual desert – truly a *Dies iræ, dies illa*.

We are called to live in expectation: to interact - forgiving, caring, counselling, moving forward in life; seeking above all to love. All these makes us signs of the Lord's return in glory, using our talents for the consummation of his Kingdom, which truly has no end. Indeed, growing in and revealing the gift of Faith, we might even find talents we never realised we had.

Living in expectation draws us to know that whatever is happening within our lives, we are never alone, always accompanied; always cherished by the God of Love through Faith in Jesus Christ – the greatest treasure of all. Living in this way helps to transform the world.



Parable of the Talents - 14th century German stained glass panel, Church of St Etienne, Mulhouse, France

Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-end

Be silent before the Lord God!

For the day of the Lord is at hand;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,

‘The Lord will not do good,
nor will he do harm.’

Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses,

they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

The Great Day of the Lord
The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.

That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.
I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the Lord,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the Lord's wrath;
in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25: 14-30

The Kingdom of heaven will be as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."