

Encourage one another

Matthew 25:14-30, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

19th November 2023

A couple of days ago there was a headline on the BBC website. It drew attention to “Six places you might not know were named after people”. Well, although Thessalonica was not one of the six, I certainly didn’t know that it was named after the sister of Alexander the Great, one-time king of Macedonia and the greatest military leader of his time. At least I didn’t know it until some years ago I had the good fortune to go on a pilgrimage ‘in the footsteps of St Paul’, when re-traced the Apostle’s second missionary journey. It was the charming Greek tourist guide who imparted the information amongst other useful background details.

Setting off from Thessaloniki we travelled South on the Aegean coast passing through the beautiful Greek countryside we finally arrived at Athens and Corinth, just as Paul did before us. From the comfort of our air-conditioned coach we could really appreciate the hardships the Apostle and his missionary companions had to go through on their historic journey. But they were driven by an amazing missionary zeal to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the world and no hardship was going to stop them.

In one of our Life & Faith groups the question was raised recently, what kind of hardships would we be prepared to face in order to further God’s kingdom in our day? Perhaps it is a relevant question we could all ask ourselves. In Paul’s case this particular journey took him to Macedonia, his first venture into mainland Europe. After setting up a church in Philippi his next port of call was Thessalonica the capital city of Macedonia.

In Paul’s time the city was part of the Roman Empire and enjoyed the privileges of a free city status. In its religious practices polytheism was the dominant force though there was also a Jewish community there, who worshipped in their synagogue. It was here that Paul preached and has found some followers, who formed the kernel of the Christian church in Thessalonica. It is thought that this letter to the Thessalonians is the very first written book of the NT dating from about 50/51 CE, coming from a mere 20 years after Jesus’ crucifixion and pre-dating all the gospels. So, it is quite a precious document as it reveals some of the pre-occupations of the early church and shows Paul’s own developing theology.

Well, we are rapidly approaching Advent, the time of preparation and getting ready to celebrate once more the coming of God in a vulnerable baby. This is the time traditionally set aside by the Church to reflect on the so-called ‘final things’, and that’s what the Lectionary readings are all about. They portray the early church’s expectation of the imminent return of Jesus and their way of getting ready for the event. Last Sunday we heard reference to Jesus’ parable of the well-prepared and unprepared bridesmaids and this Sunday’s Gospel reading continues the theme with the parable of the talents. Both of them emphasise the importance of spending the waiting time wisely and our task is to see what this means for our time and our lives.

Today we are helped in our quest by a reading from the 1st Letter to the Thessalonians, which also deals with the same questions. But before we look at the text it may be worth reminding ourselves that, Paul’s letters were not written with the intention of setting unchanging rules in stone, as it were. Rather they were parts of an ongoing dialogue usually addressing particular questions or anxieties raised by the churches Paul had founded or had associations with. They reveal a process of seeking to find the practical out-workings of Jesus’ teachings within lively worshipping *communities*. Jesus’ teachings, expressed in his parables were often taken more as individual directions and understood as ways to *personal salvation*; they emphasised personal responsibility in using the waiting time. Paul, in his turn had to translate their meaning for his communities of faith, where personal responsibility was extended into corporate, mutual responsibility for each other.

In Thessalonica, there was some anxiety about the coming of the Day of the Lord, Christ’s second coming and how best to get ready for it. Paul was eager to strengthen the

faith of his friends whilst not minimising the possibility of an imminent return of the Christ. Living in expectation of meeting Christ is what he is talking about and it is certainly of interest to us as well whether we think of it as an actual event or as a metaphor.

Our expectations are usually based – perhaps rightly so – on making realistic calculations, on statistical trends and sober likelihoods. But do we also give real consideration of God entering into the situation and changing everything that we so carefully prepared in one particular direction? In my childhood I often heard the phrase from my elders, which I don't hear very much these days, even in Christian circles, *Deo volente*, or DV for short, meaning *if God wills it*. It was an acknowledgement and a reminder that all our decision-making is provisional and dependent on the wiser counsel of the ever-present God with us. The Hebrew Scriptures call it *waiting on the Lord*. There it means living in anticipation with hope and trust in the living God rather than giving in to needless fears and anxieties. I like to call it *leaving room for the Holy Spirit*. It may sound a rather passive stance, but in fact, it requires a lot of effort to be still and know that God is there.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for their living in this kind of anticipation calling them children of the day, children of the light. It is said that the task of sons, or children in the ancient world was to carry on the work of their father. So, this is what Paul may have had in mind when he used the phrase. Children of the light are the children of the ultimate light, God and therefore they are to live by holding that light and concern themselves with the concerns of their Father in heaven. Jesus himself called his followers the light of the world and that's how Paul sees the vocation of all Christians too. As children of light they are to face every kind of darkness inside and out confidently with the light of Christ in them. In a world, like ours the darkness of hopelessness about our future as a human race and even our Planet can threaten to overwhelm us. So, we need to know that we are children of light. And every moment we are able to live as such increases God's kingdom in the world that little bit.

Finally, Paul points out what this means within the bounds of a community. The servants in the parable of the talents all want to please their Master in their own way, regardless of what the others are doing. The wise and foolish bridesmaids are all equally expecting the arrival of the groom with their individual preparations. Being part of a community of God's people requires more. "Encourage one another, build one another up", says the Apostle. And this is probably the very best advice he could give to any Christian community even today. We are not here merely for our own reasons, we could even say that our well being within the community is now the responsibility of those around us. And that we, in our turn, are called upon to see to the well being of the others by encouraging each other and building each other up.

There are many different ways of being an encourager. It can be a way of providing means for others' transformation. According to the calendar of the Saints, Nov 17th is designated to St Hilda of Whitby. She was the founder and first Abbess of Whitby Abbey in the 7th century. She was an intelligent, highly educated and influential person, who is now regarded as the patron saint of learning, culture and particularly of poetry. This is all due to the fact that she has recognised and encouraged the poetical gifts of an unlearned herdsman working for the Abbey called Caedmon. Caedmon had a dream in which he was told to sing verses to the glory of God. When Hilda learnt about this she took Caedmon under her wings and ensured that he received all the necessary education to develop his gift. Caedmon became the first English poet. He was remembered, yesterday, on the 18th Nov. According to Wikipedia (and I love this entry!), apart from his religious poetry Caedmon is also "significant to people who hate singing in public and people who develop new talents in later life". Now, isn't this encouraging for a lot of us?!

Another way of discovering and nurturing the hidden potential of people can be seen in Jesus' actions in calling disciples. Simon, son of Jonah, whose name means 'wavering', unsteady' as well as 'listener' receives a new name: Peter, 'the rock'. The Gospels well illustrate how Peter grows into that role in spite of his impulsive, act-before-thinking nature. Well, we may not be called to change people's name, but we can certainly change our own

perception of their character and begin to treat them AS IF they were already living up to their full potential. We might be surprised just what a difference that can make.

And so, we come to the Table of Thanksgiving, where we can give thanks for the communities we have been placed in; where we can ask for the grace to be children of light and encouragers of each other so that we may be ready to meet the risen Christ tomorrow in people and events as well as face to face at the end of times. Amen

Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church