

**St Paul's Beckenham on Sunday 5th November 2023**  
**Sermon notes, Rev'd Rachel Winn**

**Gospel ~ Matthew 24:1-14**  
**1 Thessalonians 2 v 9-13**

**Introduction**

Our gospel reading today is not a merry picture, is it?

Although Jesus is personally addressing his disciples in the first century I imagine that as he describes:

- Wars and rumours of wars
- Nations against nations
- Famines and earthquakes
- False prophets...

It wouldn't be surprising that some may think we are living in those end times.

Jesus' disciples don't seem that surprised at his predictions but they were eager to know *when* all these things would happen. I expect they thought it was all imminent - their limited understanding about the Messiah would lead them to think that he is about to overthrow the Romans and herald in God's rule any day now. What *would* they have thought if they could look into the future and see that over the course of 2000 years many similar 'signs' have taken place... and are evident to this very day.

I remember four decades ago, when my brother, Steve, and I were in our early teens, in some of our Christian circles there was much talk about the 'end times' and how we were living in them...

It is a standing joke in our family that Steve was particularly thrilled about this and decided he wouldn't need to study for his O'levels if Jesus was about to return anytime soon!

The truth is, we, like the apostles, are still living in an 'in between' place, where God has won the victory through the resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, but we **still** await God's ultimate Kingdom rule; we are 'nearly there, but not there yet.'

This *in between* place is what some theological scholars call a 'liminal space' - in no-man's land.

**Susan Beaumont's** book '*How to Lead when you don't know Where you are Going*'<sup>1</sup> describes 'liminality' as a place of waiting, of uncertainty, and of disorientation - often with particular challenges.

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**Susan Beaumont**, *How to Lead When You Don't know Where You're Going*, (London, The Roman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. 2019)

You here at St Paul's Beckenham, entered a 'liminal space' when your interregnum began. It is often not a comfortable place to be; there are opportunities but there are dangers too, in liminal spaces.

- This is a perfect time to take stock and look back at what you have been doing in your parish; (Q: is it working?)
- It is a perfect time to pray together about the future (establish a regular prayer meeting, make this a priority)
- It is a *particular* time to notice each others' gifts as you step into additional roles you perhaps avoided when you had a vicar

### **But it can be a time of danger too...**

- It can feel chaotic
- There can be a temptation to prematurely drive through new agenda's in the attempt to be seen to be 'doing something' special
- It can be a time when some people **grow cold** and slip away from the fellowship

But you are not alone. Just as the disciples were not alone when they faced the predicted horrors no longer with Jesus by their side. *They were equipped and empowered by his holy Spirit.*

### **Main**

Our scripture starts with the disciples marvelling at the temple and urging Jesus to note its architectural excellence. The temple was a truly magnificent structure, but we need to understand that it was not solely an impressive **building**.

The temple symbolised the Jews' unique covenantal relationship with the living God, Jehovah. So when Jesus predicts that the temple will be 'torn down' and utterly destroyed, his words are extremely shocking. He is describing a terrible event which affects not just their **place of worship** but their whole **identity** as people chosen by God.

He is indicating that the kind of relationship the Jewish people currently have with God will no longer exist.

### **But...**

There is not only foretelling of horrendous events and suffering, but a warning from Jesus that *'many will fall away'* and *'the love of many will grow cold.'*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Ch. 24:10,12

### Q: Do we miss this point sometimes?

In all the dramatic events Jesus speaks of (of wars and natural disasters) do we *miss* that among those signs lies another deadly prediction - that many people who once loved God will cold-shoulder him?

### Q: Can there be anything more sad than a love for God that dies?

#### **When love for our creator dies, everything changes.**

- ~ When we do not love God we direct our love towards other things less important than God
- ~ our priorities change
- ~ our perspective often narrows
- ~ concern for ourselves often increases
- ~ Seeking what God has planned for our lives takes a back seat

There is no doubt that tragic and disastrous global events need our attention, but if our *love has grown cold* we are far less likely to even *want* to respond to human need.

Perhaps the more **dramatic** disasters can become a smokescreen to cover up our own failure to love God, and ourselves and each other.

### Q: Are not **both** major disasters and a 'love grown cold' deadly serious issues?

### Q: So, where is the good news?!

On the news today we watch nations in turmoil, spewing hatred on each other and it is easy to feel powerless and disheartened. And yet, as Christians, we treasure the news of an *alternative kingdom*, where almighty God is in charge, where love covers over a multitude of wrongdoings and where '*justice flows like rivers.*'<sup>3</sup> This is fantastic 'counter-cultural news,' the foundation of which is **love**.

- Love that refuses to grow cold.
- Love that endures when things are bleak beyond belief.
- Love that remembers that after death comes resurrection.

This *enduring love* is what the disciples chose to run with when they were witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ, despite hardship, persecution and the threat of martyrdom.

In our Thessalonians passage Paul describes how deeply the apostles felt about this community they lived within:

In the preceding verse, v8 Paul describes a depth of love for the Thessalonians; like that of a 'nursing mother' and of being *delighted* to share not just the gospel but **their whole lives** with these people.

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<sup>3</sup> Amos 5:24

This positive 'witness' of the apostles was a winning factor in the growth and development of this young Thessalonian church.

Paul then describes developing and nurturing them 'like a (good) father' would: encouraging, comforting, propelling them to live lives:

*'...worthy of the name of Christ.'*<sup>4</sup> It was the WITNESS of the apostle's daily lives, **alongside** their message of the gospel, which had such a powerful and lasting effect on the young church.

2 weeks ago I was speaking with a friend in a church not too far from here. She spoke of a woman, a young mother, who had no Christian background but through the love of the congregation had found Christ and been baptised recently. Her partner knew nothing about Jesus or the gospel, but gave testimony to being so impressed by the change in his girlfriend's attitudes and lifestyle that he recognised something big had happened in her life. He came to Christ not long after. Now, that is a powerful, everyday witness, with eternal consequences.

And I believe **every one of us** has a testimony of some kind.

Some are dramatic, some are less so, but *every testimony to Christ* is important in the life and growth of the church, especially in these troubled times when others around us are fearful and despairing about the state of the world.

Each one of you, **everyone** here in this *congregation*, has a God-given role to play in this parish and a testimony to share. Regardless of your qualifications, your age, your relationships, your financial status, whether you think you have a special gift or not... We are all called to be witnesses to the truth we have received.

**But it needs to be your testimony, not someone else's.**

**YOUR own testimony matters!**

If you were in a court of law and had to give a witness statement you would not be asked about what *another person* saw or heard, you would be asked about what **you** saw with your own eyes or heard with your own ears.

**So...Q:**

- What has Jesus Christ done *for you & with you* so far?
- How has he transformed you?
- What brought you into relationship with him?
- What is your God-story?

Two years ago - an elderly man in our church requested a visit from me, 86 years old. He had experienced a series of unusual 'encounters' with people about Christianity. I was flattered at the invitation.

(Cakes and tea, quiet room - he was expectant!).

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:12

The gentleman handed me an A4 sheet of paper with the tiniest of writing detailing all the strange 'God-events' then said:

**"I want you to tell me, What does it all mean, *what is God calling me to do?*"**

Well, I can tell you, as a curate wanting to impress I hoped God would give me some Daniel-like divine interpretation - and fast! (I admit, I was vaguely tempted to *make up* some bold interpretation of these events or to utter some profound prophesy over this gentleman's life).

But in my panic all that came to me was a suggestion that he seek wisdom directly from God, perhaps by practicing Contemplative silence (Spirituality module):

- I suggested starting with a prayer of invitation to God's Holy Spirit, followed by sitting for lengthy silences
- And that he develop a regular spiritual practice of listening to God until he understood what God's call on his life was.

To my utter embarrassment he said:

**"Is that it?! Well, I must say I'm disappointed! I thought *you, as a priest, were going to be able to reveal to me what God was saying.*"**

(I left his house with an ego a lot smaller than when I entered it!).

However, over the course of these last two years I have watched this 88 year old man's 'witness' to Christ blossom.

- He has developed one of the most incredible ministries, particularly among other men.
- He has brought new people to our Welcome Space,
- He has formed wonderful friendship groups
- He reaches out to the loneliest of people and
- Faithfully maintains regular contact
- He has accompanied the sick on difficult journeys & ...
- Frequently engages in conversations with total strangers ~ and there is always some 'God element' in it.

A few weeks ago he led the prayers at our midweek Holy Communion and he announced that my advice to him to listen to God through silence had transformed his life. He seemed to have forgotten how disappointing my words had been at the time! At such a late stage, this man's life mirrors Paul's sentiment about the Thessalonians, that:

*God's word, is not just being humanly 'received' but is clearly at work in the believers<sup>5</sup>*

The very fact that you are here today suggests that each one of you is a **witness** to *something* that Jesus Christ has done in our lives - and your witness is unique

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (paraphrased)

to you, so don't compare yourself to anyone else. Don't look at anyone else and think they have a better story to tell - **Your Jesus-testimony is wonderful - and someone nearby needs to hear it!**

Our witness is also dynamic - meaning that our testimonies evolve and change over time. Sometimes they are joyful stories of victory, and sometimes they are raw and laced with pain. I believe people need to see both. Don't miss out the gory bits and only give the sanitised version, as Christians can be tempted to do! If you have repeated struggles and doubts, that is an uncomfortable but *truthful part* of your testimony!

How powerful it is when a Christian is real about their struggles, like Paul? Because many a powerful testimony demonstrates that *'through it all,'* our eyes are still fixed on Jesus, even when life is messy and disappointing.

Paul declares: **God's word is at work in the believers.**

*What is he doing in you? What is your story? And who needs to hear it?*

*How has Christ changed you? What have you learned? How are you different?*

*Is he transforming your marriage? Your work? Your attitudes? Using your gifts and talents? Enhancing your relationships?*

Share it... you never know who it will impact.

Last Sunday evening Marie, Youla and Bea, made a public profession, two of them sharing their individual testimony. They stood in front of a crowd of people and were confirmed by the Bishop and with the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Who knows what God will do in each of their lives from here on?**

When individuals step out in faith like this God can really 'go to work.'

But when a Christian raises their head about the parapet it is also like waving a red flag to the enemy - so **Pray for them, that their love never grows cold!**

**And so to finish...**

When we see the kind of signs Jesus describes occurring now, in the 21st century, rather than let our 'love grow cold' let us offer our individual and corporate witness to Christ's transforming power. Let us roll up our sleeves up and get on with being witnesses to God's love by living out God's kingdom *in the midst of human suffering* - starting with what we can do right here in the parish, just like my elderly gentleman. When we start to respond locally, we are often then equipped and used to witness in greater ways than we can initially imagine.

**A final thought occurred to me...**

If you don't feel you have any testimony to offer, why not ask God to give you one? And during your interregnum here at St Paul's you might really benefit from hearing each other's testimonies.

Perhaps when you have a sermon slot to fill and no-one available to preach, why not use the opportunity to interview one member of the congregation about God's activity (past and present) in their lives?

*And always be an encouragement to one another, in what is undoubtedly a challenging time for any church.*