

St John the Baptist, Catford

Zephaniah 1:7,12-18

Psalms 90

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

“Another of the king’s chief men signified his agreement ..., and went on to say: ‘*Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your theigns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While*

he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.”

This famous speech to King Edwin of Kent, persuading him to convert to the Christian faith, was made in AD 627, before he was baptised by St Paulinus.

It described poetically the way life is like a fleeting passage through the warmth of the king’s hall, in through one end, fluttering about briefly, before disappearing out again through the other end. It is

often quoted as a description of what life is like; and yet, the counsellor, speaking before the king, is in fact saying that it is different with Christianity.

Not for us the bleakness of going back out into the night.

And yet you might be forgiven for not quite finding the same comfort in our readings this morning.

Our psalm in particular tells us:

“You turn us back to dust. ...

You sweep them away like a dream;

they fade away suddenly like the grass.

In the morning it is green and flourishes;

in the evening it is dried up and withered.”

“The days of our life are three score years and ten, or if our strength endures, even four score; yet the sum of them is but labour and sorrow, for they soon pass away and we are gone.”

In Zephaniah: *“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’. ... [A] full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. “*

And St Paul tells us that the same Lord *“will come like a thief in the night.”*

You might be forgiven for preferring the version of life as a sparrow, flitting through into the warmth of this life, before the unknown of the cold night, rather than

the judgment described; though both share the image of this life as being the mere blinking of an eye in the midst of eternity.

I have to say, I found these readings rather depressing in the context of the autumn of the year that 2020 has become. It is too easy to feel a general lethargy, alongside just feeling all-round fed up.

Sloth is famously one of the seven deadly sins, and yet the word 'sloth' doesn't quite capture the meaning of the Latin word which it translates, which is '*acedia*'. That really means a kind of listlessness, no longer caring.

This sounds to us rather like depression, and now we would be very loath to blame someone for that state, and indeed we would be wrong to do so.

But, while the Church has historically labelled despair a sin, and indeed that's what the Church Fathers said blasphemy against the Holy Spirit amounted to, it is important that we keep Hope as a virtue.

St Thomas Aquinas writes very powerfully on this, though still from a mediaeval mindset. While we cannot help feeling sadness, we sin if we stop trying to resist it, he teaches - if we start to believe that things really *are* hopeless; because that is to deny the hope that our belief in Christ gives us – the forgiveness of our sins; and God's overwhelming love for us as He has created us.

At the moment it is I think tempting to think, ‘*When will it end?*’ and ‘*What’s the point of getting up in the morning and doing things, when it’s all just such a slog, and there’s no sign that what we’re doing has value at the moment?*’

Well, while it’s ever so slightly tempting for me just to leave that question hanging and go and sit down again, it’s at precisely such times that we need St Paul’s reminder that “*you, beloved, are not in darkness [however much it might feel like it], for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day.*”

“*For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us. ... Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*”

That is precisely the message we need to here right now.

While easy to slip into listless lethargy, and I too have felt that at times over recent months, including even when starting to write this sermon if I’m honest, we are a people of hope. And that is a virtue, rather than just an outlook or disposition, as optimism is.

We are saved, though we continue to work that salvation out with fear and trembling. But what I think Jesus is trying to tell us in today’s gospel is that we cannot just *wait*. We are given gifts, and indeed the word ‘talent’ in the way we now use it comes from the word ‘talent’ used in this parable as a unit of currency; we are given gifts, and we fail if we sit back and wait instead of using them.

This life is fleeting – it *is* as if we were to fly briefly through that well-lit hall; or as if we were grass, which fades as soon as it is grown.

But the gift of time in this life is God-given, as is all we enjoy in it.

And today's readings tell us that we will be judged for how we use it.

We are given different gifts, and indeed different experiences and circumstances. But it is the duty of all of us to live thankfully, whatever they are.

If we do not; if we give in to lethargy, listlessness, even hopelessness, we fail to give thanks to God for what we have.

We fail ultimately to return the love God shows us in all we should enjoy, as hard as that can seem in difficult, even seemingly hopeless, situations.

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances”, as St Paul continues after our passage in 1 Thessalonians.

This parable of the talents is written as it is in St Matthew's gospel for those whose wait for Jesus's return was getting longer and longer. How to act while waiting?

Well, we are still waiting, and Jesus is telling us that we have a duty to give thanks for what we are given, and to use it well.

And if we do that, more than we can possibly imagine will be given to us.

Hope follows from faith and love: if we truly believe in God's love for us, we will return it, and it will then be impossible not to live hopefully.

It may seem impossible simply to decide to be hopeful, and unfair to judge a person based on whether they can be. And we are certainly not judged just because we are sad or depressed.

And yet, even in the midst of seeming despair, we should try to cling on to the glimmer of hope that our faith gives us; to the rock which we know is always there beneath our feet, even when it feels as though our feet are sliding.

If we can do that, then the night will not overwhelm us when we pass out of King Edwin's hall, because

God waits for us. Even though we cannot see it, and certainly cannot always feel it, God is before us, behind us, above us and beneath us.

Therefore have courage, take hope, and through Christ, all shall be well.

Amen