

Children of Light

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Last weekend it seemed as if the whole world was holding its breath as, for days, news channels were asking the big question ‘*Has he?*’ or ‘*Hasn’t he?*’ Has Joe Biden done enough to win the Presidential Election? And then the win in Pennsylvania finally pushed him over the line and victory was declared. A few days ago, Facebook reminded me of a post I’d shared exactly four years ago. It was a mock photo of the Statue of Liberty goddess with her hands covering her face in disbelief. It seemed to sum up what many were feeling in 2016 following Donald Trump’s shock election victory. And I guess that many in the US, deeply unhappy at the behaviour of their president, have been asking in the four years since, ‘*How long? How long?*’

The Christians in Thessalonica reading Paul’s letter had been asking a similar question. In chapter 1 of his letter we hear how the people had turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and were waiting for the return of God’s Son from heaven, whom he’d raised from the dead. But Jesus hadn’t yet returned and some of them were dying. The Thessalonians were longing for Paul to return to Thessalonica so that he could explain why this was the case. ‘*How long?*’ may well have been the question on everyone’s lips: ‘*How long do we have to put up with the military might of Roman rule, with persecution, with threat of violence, before Jesus returns? How long?*’

In chapter 4, last week’s reading, Paul reassures them that those who have fallen asleep, those who have died before Jesus’ return, won’t be forgotten, as they will be the first to rise and meet their Lord. And in today’s reading, Paul deals with the ‘*When?*’ question. And he deals with it by telling them that it isn’t actually an issue at all – because of their identity as ‘Children of Light’. From the Message translation, he says this:

‘I don’t think, friends, that I need to deal with the question of when all this is going to happen. You know as well as I that the day of the Master’s coming can’t be posted on our calendars. He won’t call ahead and make an appointment any more than a burglar would... But friends, you’re not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You’re sons of Light, daughters of Day... So let’s not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let’s keep our eyes open and be smart... Since we’re creatures of Day, let’s act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.’

How should they live in the darkness of the times in which they were living? By being 'Children of Light', ready to shine the light of God's love in light and dark places alike.

As 'Children of Light' in the 21st century, we need to be aware of the darkness in this world – the places, issues and people that lack, and therefore need, God's light, love and hope. On Sunday, the vicar of Histon and Impington and Rural Dean of North Stowe Deanery, James Blandford-Baker, tweeted that '*We should pray for Donald Trump now ... many people come to faith in a moment when they realise they are powerless. If only there was someone around him to speak the truth.*' And many people agreed with him, with one person commenting: '*It will be January before the new team take over. I see light, but I feel led to pray against darkness too.*' Many in the US of course will have been praying for years to see light in what they regarded as the darkness of Donald Trump's presidency, and those prayers were answered last week as he became one of only ten presidents in the history of America not to win a second term. This particular period of darkness may have come to an end, but there are many other situations and places that need the light of Christ to shine.

How do we bring God's light, love and hope to those living in South America, affected by Hurricane Eta last week? Or to countries ravaged by long-term conflict and war, such as Syria, Afghanistan, or the Yemen where over 12 million children are in urgent need of food, water and medical supplies. Where more than five years of fighting has already pushed Yemen and its health system to the brink of collapse, even before the pandemic hit.

How do we bring light to the crisis of climate change? With temperatures rising, drought and wild fires occurring more frequently, rainfall patterns shifting, glaciers melting and the global mean sea level rising? Has the urgency gone away because we're responding to other more pressing global issues, the most predominant being, of course, the coronavirus pandemic?

We saw light in the darkness on Monday with news of a vaccine as early as next month. Great news but, as Matt Hancock reminds us, there are many hurdles yet to overcome. Yes, there are hurdles in ensuring its safety and getting the vaccine to those who need it most, but what about those living in Third World countries, those like the Yemen on the brink of collapse? Who is shouting for them and demanding their protection? Or those living in refugee camps where social distancing, good sanitation and the availability of PPE are pipe dreams, not reality?

How do we bring light to these dark places? Well, let's look at what Paul told the Thessalonians. At a time when it seemed incredibly dark for them, Paul says: *'be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.'* If you're a soldier, your armour – your breastplate and your helmet - is your uniform. It's what makes you stand out from others. It's part of your identity, and quickly communicates who you are and what you represent. *'Dress up in faith, love and the hope of salvation'* Paul says, *'let these be your armour. And encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.'*

And if you think you've heard Paul speak of faith, hope and love before, well you have. In that great passage on love from 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says *'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'* What does that look like for us as Christians in Cottenham and Rampton in 2020? As people of faith, we're called to both deepen our faith and share the faith with others. In 1 Peter 3: 15, Paul says:

'In your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...'

And, as people of hope, we're called to pray. To pray for those situations that seem impenetrable to change, where there's little sign of light. Because we've been there before and change *has* come, and in many instances through the determination of people of faith – remember the abolition of slavery, the ending of Apartheid, the defeat of Hitler, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall to name but a few. And hopefully, with a vaccine, the end of Coronavirus.

And love. Love is best demonstrated in action. Our faith in action. Through the little things we do for each other, in encouraging one another and building one another up, but also through the way we serve our communities. And many of you are doing just that at the moment. Donating food to the foodbank, signing petitions on issues of social justice, giving money to charities working on the front line to alleviate poverty and disease. And there'll be other ways too.

Paul urges the Thessalonians to stay awake and alert. What do we notice if we stay awake and alert? Perhaps being 'Children of Light' is about noticing where God is already working in our world and joining in. And conversely, noticing where the dark corners are – so that we can bring the light of faith, hope and love to those places.

Amen.