**10th November 2019**

**2 Thessalonians 2.1-5,13-17**

On this Remembrance Sunday we continue to look at Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians.  In today’s passage, Paul tries to reassure the Thessalonians that God is still in charge of history even though the pagan power of Rome seems to be on the increase and the Church is finding itself under pressure. He urges them to ‘stand firm’ and to remain untroubled by the gathering darkness around them: this is to be expected before Christ’s return. Since those days there have been many times when evil tyrants have stalked the earth and committed great atrocities, or when ghastly wars have claimed the lives of millions. Can Christians still retain Paul’s confidence in God’s overarching control? How might we bolster our own faith in the face of adversity?

This is undoubtedly one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament and it is so because it is using terms and thinking in pictures which were familiar to Paul and those whom he was writing but which are strange to us. The general picture is this. Paul was telling the Thessalonians that they must give up their nervous hysterical waiting for the second coming. He denied that he had ever said that the Day of the Lord had come. That was a misinterpretation of his words which must not be attributed to him. So, the first issue he raises is that of his hearers being alarmed and unsettled by mistruths and false teaching.

Many people uncritically accept what they read on the internet. They are easy prey for charlatans and fraudsters who promise miracle cures or instant success. Some may lose money, while sick people may put their trust in ‘remedies’ that not only fail to cure them but allow their condition to deteriorate. In Paul’s day, people were proclaiming forms of Christianity that bore little relationship to the authentic apostolic version. The apostle therefore warned the Thessalonian Christians to distinguish his teaching from that being promoted by others. What might have happened if they had ignored his advice? How can people today be persuaded to assess carefully what they read and hear?

[A study of social media posts](http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146) conducted in 2016 and 2017 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology   discovered that false claims were 70 per cent more likely to be shared than true ones. This means that false news reaches more people than genuine news: the top 1 per cent of false news was read by between 1,000 and 100,000 people; while the truth was rarely passed on to more than 1,000 people. Falsehood was also disseminated faster than truth, with genuine stories taking six times as long as false ones to reach 1,500 people. The study concluded that some of these differences may be due to the degree of novelty in the information or the emotional responses of recipients. What implications might this have for the spread of both the historic Christian gospel and new ‘cultic’ forms of religion in our age?

Online misinformation has become a hot topic ever since completely made-up posts with fake headlines like "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President" spread during the 2016 US presidential election.

Today, misinformation more often resembles the story about Jo Swinson the leader of the Liberal democrats and the false allegation that Ms Swinson's husband personally benefits from European Union funds and this is the main reason why she is against Brexit – His company has received some grants from the EU but not himself personally. But it is election time so why not make false accusations and slander people?

"Monster Crash" is a joke video with a serious message - it implies that Boris Johnson and the Conservative cabinet member Jacob Rees-Mogg stand to profit by engineering a financial crash brought on by a no-deal Brexit.

However, last month the prime minister renegotiated a deal with the EU, which Mr Rees-Mogg voted for. This would seem to pour cold water on the conspiracy theory that they are working to trigger a no-deal Brexit "monster crash" for financial gain.

As with the Swinson story, several of the elements of the story are true - for instance Mr Rees-Mogg does have a stake in a major investment fund but there has not been enough evidence produced that a few shadowy financiers are pulling the strings of a no-deal Brexit puppet.

But the effect can be the same. As it spirals through the internet, and is rewritten and re-shared, kernels of fact fall by the wayside, and mistruths spread like wildfire.

It’s election campaign time! Perhaps Paul’s message to ignore false prophets (v.3) and stand firm (v.15) for the truth is a timely one? What are the truths that matter, the big issues (beyond party politics) that guide our voting? How do we decide? In the Gospel reading, Jesus gives us a clue – God is concerned with the living (v.38). If we think about the people and places we care about, what really matters in their lives today, that we want our government to prioritize?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Philip Pullman’s His dark materials are being serialized by the BBC on Sunday evenings. It has been billed as the atheists answer to Cs Lewis in its takedown of organized religion.

If you think [Harry Potter is a great political allegory for today’s world](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/donald-trump/12038347/Donald-Trumps-Muslim-ban-unites-Republicans-and-Democrats-against-him.html), then you’ve obviously not read His Dark Materials. Yes, the Potter books give us a dangerous fascist on the rise, but His Dark Materials gives us an enemy that is not only already the accepted authority but happens to be the Church. The Magisterium, as Pullman renames it, is an organization in the ultimate position of power; to criticize it is to blaspheme. Just as Donald Trump’s doubters across the pond are branded “unpatriotic” for daring to question their new president, so too critics of the Magisterium are quickly shut down.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Pullman has been savaged in some places for his brutal takedown of religion, but his real target is institutionalized belief and the leaders who use scripture to justify their wants or hates. The same kind of fierce scrutiny could also be applied to a political leader or party seeking to rule by fear or legislate for personal gain.

Pullman himself confirmed the criticism against his book when he spoke out against the Church.

"In one way, I hope the wretched organization will vanish entirely,"

"...Whenever you get a political structure, with ranks and hierarchies, you get corruption; you get people who are more interested in progressing through those ranks than in doing good. Power corrupts."

Philip added: "In my view, belief in God seems to be a very good excuse, on the part of those who claim to believe, for doing many wicked things that they wouldn't feel justified in doing without such a belief."

Pullman found support from some other Christians, most notably from [Rowan Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rowan_Williams), the former [Archbishop of Canterbury](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archbishop_of_Canterbury) (spiritual head of the [Anglican Communion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_Communion)), who argued that Pullman's attacks focus on the constraints and dangers of [dogmatism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogma) and the use of religion to [oppress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oppression), not on Christianity itself. However, I wonder if, like many atheists, he is attacking a straw man – a caricature of the church. I watched a programme of him the other night and he wants to attack organisations that promote unfounded truths – such as he believes the church does. Yet he has a belief in freedom and equality and the ultimate victory of love and goodness. None of those outcomes have any evidential basis – but are faith beliefs.

Paul is calling his listeners back to the historical events of the death and resurrection of Jesus and what that means about our belief in God, the type of God we believe in and the one for whom neither sin, evil or death will have the last word over. God will put the world to rights on the Day of the Lord.

And he tells them that before the Day of the Lord comes much had still to happen. First there would come an age of rebellion against God; into this world there had already come a secret evil power which was working in the world. Somewhere there was one who was as much the incarnation of evil as Jesus was the incarnation of the love of God. This is the lawless one. In time the power which was restraining the lawless one would be removed. Satan would work through the lawless one doing all sorts of counterfeit signs and wonders – a powerful delusion. But then the Lord Jesus will come and finally defeat the lawless one and gather to himself all who have stood firm in the truth. It would be a kind of cosmic battle in which evil incarnate would make its final assault and receive its final defeat.

Is Paul talking about events in his time? Shortly before Paul began his missionary journeys in 41AD there had been a major crisis in the Middle East. The Roman Emperor Caligula convinced of his own divinity and angry with the Jews over various matters ordered a huge statue of himself to be placed in the temple. There were massive Jewish protests at this provocative project. Only Caligula’s sudden murder prevented a major disaster. However, the Roman Jewish war of 66-73 AD came 25 years later and destroyed the Jewish temple anyway. Perhaps Paul, aware of what had happened, envisaged sooner or later some other megalomaniac would have the same idea of elevating themselves to the level of divinity and forcing compliance with their ways.

Paul’s predictions have of course led to much speculation down the ages. Was the lawless one Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn – it all depends what papers you read! The reticence on Paul’s part to name names is resented by many sensation-starved and curious Christians or those who belong to apocalyptic cults such as the Jehovah Witnesses. All of this would be laughable were it not for the fact that it devours so much energy and money and attracts such obsessive interest among anxious, fearful and fundamentalist type people who look at the letter of the book rather than the big message.

Don’t get me wrong. Lawlessness is terrifying. Anyone living under a totalitarian regime can bear witness to the horror and fear lawlessness induces. A hammering on the door at the dead of night. Brusque commands and rough hands. Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment. No questions asked, no explanations given. No appeal, no one to speak for you, no vindication, no justice.

The influential rich or politically powerful rise cynically above the law or enact laws that serve their advantage. Perjury and false witness or even worse, state sponsored contract killings occur. A lawless society is spawned in hell.

This week saw the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron curtain. The pictures of people enjoying freedom and unification reminds us of those precious things that we take for granted at our peril and which previous generations have sacrificed their lives for. Lest we forget – we shall remember.

What is clear though is Paul’s firm belief that a time was coming in which God’s judgement on the idolatrous world and its blasphemous leaders would eb unveiled. God will judge during history and finally at the end of history the imperial systems that put themselves in the place of God. There have been enough of them in our own recent past for us to see something of the way they operate, the deceits they weave and the way in which people get caught up in the web of their lies. What Paul would have us grasp is the fact that God remains sovereign over all and will one day put all wrongs to right and bring all human empires under the rule and judgement of his saving kingdom of love and peace.

So, we need to stand firm and hold tight. If you are on an airport bus perhaps taking you from the terminal building to the airplane you are told to stand firm and hold tight. On a narrow mountain ledge when a sudden storm sweeps in when a slight movement may cause injury or even death – stand firm. Plant both feet as solidly as you can, take hold of the safety rope or anything else you can hang on to and brace yourself for the shock. In troubled times you can be tossed to and fro.

Paul is quite clear; the safety rope consists of the traditions you were taught; that is the foundational Christian teachings which Paul and the apostles, those who were with Jesus and knew his resurrection, had given them and us and confirmed later by letter – the stuff we have in our New testament. The basic facts of the gospel. The traditions of the church such as baptism and communion, the fundamental principles of Christian behaviour, especially agape love – love of one another and love even for your enemies. Hold on tight to these things and you won’t go far wrong. This is as true today as it was in the first century.

In this end passage there is a kind of synopsis of the Christian life.

The Christian life starts with God’s call. No one chooses themselves. We could never even begin to seek God unless God had already found us. The whole initiative is with God; the seeking searching love of God for us.

But that develops in our effort. The Christian is not called to dream but to take part in the fight and struggle of life. We are **not called to stand still but to stand firm** and to climb. We are called to the greatest privilege and task in the world to share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All that is helped by God. We are never left to struggle and fight on our own. The God who gives us the task also gives us the strength to do it and do it with us. At the back and beside of us is God. When Paul was up against it in Corinth, he had a vision by night and in it the Lord said ‘Do not be afraid … for I am with you (acts 18.9-10).

This call and effort are designed to produce two things: sanctification or consecration – which means being set apart for God in such a way that God can use you for God’s service. Secondly it is designed to produce eternal encouragement. The Christian life does not end with time; its goal is eternity. The Christian is the person who can regard their present struggle and affliction in the light of eternity and the glory that shall be.

Stand firm against falsehood and mis truth

Stand firm for the truth and the gospel

Stand firm against evil and injustice

Stand firm in your faith that God wins. In Christ we have the victory.

And

**16**May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, **17**encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

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2. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/feb/16/his-dark-materials-lessons-for-today-philip-pullman-the-book-of-dust> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)