**15th November 2020**

**1 Thessalonians 5.1-11**

**Know the times and the seasons. Be awake, children of the light. Put on faith and love like a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. The Lord is with you. Encourage each other and build one another up.**

The first effective coronavirus vaccine which could prevent more than 90% of people from getting Covid-19, was revealed this week.

The developers - Pfizer and BioNTech - described it as a "great day for science and humanity".

Their vaccine has been tested on 43,500 people in six countries and no safety concerns have been raised.

The companies plan to apply for emergency approval to use the vaccine by the end of the month.

No vaccine has gone from the drawing board to being proven highly effective in such a short period of time.

There are still huge challenges ahead, but the announcement has been warmly welcomed with scientists describing themselves smiling "ear to ear" and some suggesting life could be back to normal by spring.

For many of us down the priority list it will be some time, if ever, that we will be queuing up for a jab, but this was a significant moment in all that we have endured this year.

For many it has provided a bit of light at the end of a dark tunnel and the best possible Christmas present. Christmas is when we proclaim the light that shines in our darkness. For those trapped in an earthbound hope – a vaccine is like a light in the present darkness. We want to rejoice in that hope too – whilst also pointing to a more profound hope in Jesus as light of the world for both earth and heaven.

President Trump, of course, is calling it a conspiracy that the vaccine wasn’t announced before the US Elections that may have given him a vital boost in the polls. Democracy, especially America’s embarrassed version, is under scrutiny and under threat.

This week has seen the annual remembrance ceremonies bringing the nation to pause and reflect on the cost of freedom and the right to vote and the sacrifices made to secure our destiny

This last week have seen some significant events.

As we look at the final chapter of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians Paul is seeking to answer another of the Thessalonians’ big questions: Are we ready?. How do we know when Jesus will return? To which Paul says we don’t know. It will be as sudden as the start of labour, as unexpected as a night thief. So, we have to be ready, ready at all times. And not asleep or partying the night away. But what does it mean to be ‘ready’ in this context? Paul uses familiar everyday militaristic language and images to talk about being prepared. Perhaps for some today, familiar and everyday language and images might be that of superheroes – the cape of faith, the superpowers of love and hope. Are you ready as a Christian for all that may come- awake to present moment and its significance?

Paul starts off by talking about times and dates – or in some translations ‘times and seasons’. ‘Times and seasons’ (1 Thessalonians 5.1) translates the Greek ‘*chronos* and *kairos*’.

The Greeks helpfully have two words for time:

* *Chronos* is the time that ticks by, minutes, hours, days and months. Many people have written 2020 off, Diaries have been discarded because nothing has happened.
* *Kairos* is the significant moment of depth and change and presence.

David Warbrick shares an illustration to bring out the difference:

On the station platform a man realizes he is tapping his foot, his body telling him he is excited, impatient. He watches the seconds counted by the clock, wishing they would go more quickly. Five minutes seems interminable. His daughter will soon be getting off the train. Then he feels a strange pang, realizing the ticking seconds are his life. Each one brings him nearer his death. It's a fleeting shift of perspective. He still wants them to go quickly, but there's an added wistfulness now. The very fact of a daughter implies his death.

At last the train comes in, brakes squealing. The people tumble off and she's there. They hug. He feels the uncomplicated warmth, the depth of togetherness, he is purely and completely present. All the world was created and history unfolded so this moment could happen. Infinity is felt in a second. As they make their way happily home, he thinks how now he wants the time to go slowly. The visit already feels too short.

The Greeks helpfully have two words for time:

* *Chronos* is the time that ticks. The man is living in *chronos* as he taps his foot impatiently and senses his life passing by.
* *Kairos* is the hugeness and depth of the moment of their hug. It is also the waiting, the longing, the wistfulness of knowing she no longer lives with him, yet the gladness at her independence and the unique joy of a visit from his now adult daughter: a new layer of emotional richness, a nuance to love that he learns to inhabit, knowing it is only possible to feel this glorious feeling because of the passing of *chronos time*.

*Chronos* isn't bad. Far from it. It gives us music. Because some brilliant people focus hard on *chronos*, measured in minims and crochets, we can experience the infinite *kairos* time of a symphony or song. But if we fixate on *chronos*, we can find ourselves either bored or in panic, so missing the *kairos*, the sense of presence, depth, rightness of moment. Fulness of life is found in *kairos*, which we apprehend when we accept the reality of *chronos* and our mortality.

The little church in Thessalonica is troubled and bereaved. Like them we may be allowed feelings of helplessness, dismay, depression. To lift them up, and us, St Paul firmly encourages us to dwell on faith, love and hope.

How are you with time in this further month of confinement and restrictions on visits and hugs? I wonder who you are longing to meet on a station platform and if the time is passing painfully slowly, each sonorous tick deepening the sense of isolation. Then maybe it goes horribly quickly as you feel the months evaporating without seeing someone you love, their mortality or yours seeming more urgent and worrisome. These are understandable *chronos* preoccupations. It is important to name them. Accepting them, is hard at first, but is not the end of the matter. St Paul shows us how, whatever our circumstances, we can turn any moment into a *kairos* moment of depth.  
  
‘Times and seasons’ (1 Thessalonians 5.1) translates ‘*chronos* and *kairos*’. [[1]](#endnote-1)Paul reassures the young church that they already know how to balance these well, even in times of persecution and hardship. As he writes, though, they are feeling frustrated and worried. *Chronos* is both dragging and hurrying as they feel the constraints of living under an oppressive empire which calls all the shots. It's a kind of coercive abusive relationship where the Empire says, ‘all is peaceful under our rule’ and yet keeps that supposed peace by the constant threat of brutal violence. We are rightly wary of politicians and institutions that make false promises. The phrase Paul uses – ‘there is peace and security’ – is just the kind of thing a world leader might say. But, sadly, we know that for too many people this simply is not true in today’s world. Paul warns us to be careful of false promises, and to put our trust in God alone, to hold onto the hope and the promise of our salvation in Jesus.

Paul undermines this ‘peaceful under our rule’ threat with splendidly unsettling images. First, casting Jesus as a thief (a joke Jesus himself cracked) he evokes the dismay Rome will feel when the one they crucified between two thieves returns to show love wins. Jesus, the thief, has the last laugh. You think the world is run on the basis that the powerful and rich always win. But the gospel says that love will win in the end. Our world pursues power and riches – but love is the most important thing.

To a coercive controlling leader, wisdom and compassion do appear to steal from you; for they gently dissolve the power you are gripping so tightly in your hands. We can think of someone describing wise voters as thieves at the moment can’t we?

Then, Paul feminizes the talk of empire, saying the great powers will be shocked by the onset of unstoppable pain like a woman in labour. This is powerful because it does imagine those wedded to empire will eventually find new life. It is a positive pain. The pain of new birth into a different reality. He is not gleeful about his persecutors’ suffering. He says they will find the transition hard, but they will be included in the new order of the universe when Christ comes. He therefore reflects on who we are to be as we wait (*chronos*) for the day of the Lord and live well with the waiting (*kairos*). Day, night, sober, drunk? How do you live when you know Christ will have the last word?

In this waiting time, waiting for the vaccine to be rolled out and have an effect – how we will use this time. Can we get beyond just feelings of surviving the days and months – to see the significance of this time and the meaning it offers to us?

A feature in this letter is that Paul encourages the Thessalonians to mind their own business and work with their hands, to win the respect of outsiders and not be dependent on anybody (4.11-12). Warn those who are idle and disruptive (5.14). Many commentators suggest that the Christian virtue of loving one another and sharing what you had with others in need was being taken advantage of by some members of the Thessalonian church. People were milking the system in blunt language.

There is genuine need in our society because of this pandemic. The furlough scheme has been a generous offer from the government to support workers whose jobs were at risk. Some, especially those self-employed have been caught out in the gaps. There has been accusations of cronyism by those who have benefited from getting contracts and jobs from people they know in government. There have been accusations of fraudulent use of the furlough system. There has been the campaign for free school meals to help those most financially vulnerable, whilst others have resisted such measures worried that it may create dependency and sets a dangerous precedent that families don’t budget for food. In the recent half term I understand that around 500 children were entitled to free school meals in our community alone. There is need out there.

This has been a time to remind ourselves of our dependence on each other, the rich and the poor, the old and the young, those key workers and those rated non-essential workers. It is a time perhaps to reconsider the welfare system. Upheavals in the welfare system often follow a crisis such as war, pandemic or recession. After the First World War, state housing was introduced. Homes fit for Heroes! The aftermath of the Second World War saw the building of much of the contemporary welfare state based on the Beveridge Report. We moved away from the so-called contributory principle, where a slice of income is saved for a rainy day and towards a more general approach of supplementing the income of those identified as being in need. Universal Basic Income is being suggested for the future and maybe a conversation needs to be had about that. With the enormous increase in state support this year welfare may have to be redesigned better at targeting funds and providing incentives.  
  
Still playing with the Empire, Paul shows them how to live using the picture of Roman armour which he hilariously puts in the service of Christ. The breastplate, he imagines as faith and love, the helmet as hope. (He'll use this again in his letters to Corinth and Ephesus.)

**Faith** is trust that Jesus' death meets us in ours and his resurrection promises ours. His company in our *chronos*-measured life changes perspective. That trust banishes the fear that *chronos* can wield and ignites every moment with *kairos* depth. If you follow Christ, your life has significance and purpose and hope. You live in the light – not walking in the darkness. You are a child of the day not the night.

The world around is living in darkness Paul claims (v.4). Don’t run away from the darkness, rather, shine in it. ‘You are all children of the light’ (v.5a). Darkness implies ignorance and sin. You were in darkness. Jesus shines his light into your life. You are a child of the light. To be a child of something is to be characterized by that thing. When Christians are spoken of as ‘children of the light’, it means that ‘light’ is your distinguishing characteristic.

Paul writes, ‘Let us not be like others, who are *asleep…*For those who sleep, sleep at night’ (vv.6–7). He goes on, ‘Whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him’ (v.10).

I have just started some mindfulness sessions on Wednesday night and one of the key insights of mindfulness is to be awake to the present moment. A definition of mindfulness can be described as being *more fully aware of your own experience in the present moment in a non-judgmental way*. That awareness helps you discern what is important, it helps you to detach your thoughts and anxieties and look at them without being overwhelmed by them. Awareness is a key aspect of self growth – finding out why we behave as we behave, react as we do, affect others as we do. Paul encourages us to be awake.

Paul writes, ‘Let us be self-controlled or sober’ (1 Thessalonians 5:8). This word literally means ‘not intoxicated by wine’. Like the other metaphors it speaks of both a physical state and a spiritual reality. Drunkenness often arises from a lack of self-control and an indulgence of the senses in order to escape reality. Seek to be self-controlled in every area of your life urges Paul. Put on the clothing of faith, love and hope (v.8).

**Love** is *agape*, the love which actively seeks the welfare of others, whether or not they care for you. This defiant love would even care for the Roman soldier who threatens you; it's the love that perceives his armour does not protect his soul.   
  
**Hope** is the confidence in the authority of heaven that allows you to see earthly power for what it is. It is living knowing Jesus has the last word.

If you feel troubled or depressed in lockdown, you are not alone. It does not mean you lack faith. Christ came to the cross in order to prove he is with you in your frustration, pain and confinement. He meets you there and will not explain it away. Feel him with you*:* *He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him*.  (1 Thessalonians 5.10).  
  
Knowing he is with you, remember that dazzling moment on the cross when Jesus had a tender conversation with the thief next to him. Even there, *agape* can make the horrible moment meaningful. I wonder who you might speak with tenderly today. Who might be delighted to receive a call or a card from you that fixes nothing, but shows them you are praying for them: *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.* (1 Thessalonians 5.11)  
  
Having begun to look outwards, and finding warmth creeping in from the promise of resurrection, I wonder which earthly powers today you trust and which look shabby or oppressive. Which institutions will experience Jesus' presence as a threat and why? Who is proclaiming peace and who is issuing threats and how far do you trust them? Now you are well placed to pray for those in power (1 Thessalonians 5.3).

Know the times and the seasons. Be awake, children of the light. Put on faith and love like a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. The Lord is with you. Encourage each other and build one another up.

**Prayer**

**Faith**  
God, I feel time slipping by, and I feel it dragging.  
Let me feel you with me, that I may find meaning in each moment.  
Smooth away my fear so that I can find blessings in these circumstances and beauty in my longing for company, for agency, for sacraments and singing.  
**Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.**

**Love**  
God, you know who I miss terribly.  
I lift them to you and ask you to protect and reassure them.  
I take courage now to ask that you will also bless those whom I don't miss:  
those I am angry or disillusioned with.  
Teach me what it means to love those I don't like or find hard to respect.  
For I trust you died and rose for them as well as for me.  
**Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.**

**Hope**  
God, with you the future is always full of possibility.  
Knowing you are with me stirs my love.  
You banish resentment.  
Help me to make the most of the strange opportunities lockdown may be offering, that, when it is over, I will not merely hand back to you the ‘talent’ of this time, but in my thanksgiving, give you back your abundant gifts with interest.  
**Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.**

**23May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.**

1. ***David Warbrick***https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/110-november-december-2020-ab/proper-28/postscript [↑](#endnote-ref-1)