

[Reading 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12]

2 Thessalonians and 1 Thessalonians, the two letters that we sent by Paul to the city, or the Christians in this city called Thessalonica. We think these were the earliest letters that Paul sent – sent around AD 50, so about 20 years after the death of Jesus, and that's actually really early: we think most, obviously the rest of the books, even the Gospels, we believe were written later than these two letters that Paul sent to Thessalonian Christians. And it's interesting because it gives us a little window into what the church was concerned about at this earlier stage that we have represented in the Bible. What were the concerns of the Christians were carrying with them. We think the first letter and the second letter Thessalonians was sent about 6 months apart, and so actually we find very similar concerns and issues in both of the letters. But in particular in this second letter, we have this preoccupation by the church on the issue of when is Jesus returning? When is Jesus returning?

Just for a moment or two I'd like us to look at some of the cities that Paul sent his letters to. Have a look at them now, for a moment.

- There's Colossae, basically just represented by a sign and a few ruined, you know, a few stones – that's at all the left of Colossae. Of course, the book of Colossians was sent to the Christians in Colossae.
- Galatia: we have more expensive ruins in Galatia, but again it's no longer a living community, it's no longer a place that has anyone, Christians or otherwise, living there.
- This is Ephesus. Now I've got a special place in my heart for Ephesus because when Sandra and I got married, we went on our honeymoon to Turkey, and we went to the ruins of Ephesus. And the road you can see there, I think it's called Straight Street which is mentioned in the Bible, and it's the street that lead from the centre of Ephesus out to the harbour. And you can still see the harbour, but sadly over the last 2000 years the Mediterranean has moved, and so now the harbour is dry and the actual coast of the Mediterranean is 20 miles further on. Now there are extensive ruins in Ephesus; you can see all sorts. They have uncovered all sorts of things. They've found the toilets: they've uncovered this long stone with little holes all the way on it – it didn't take them long to work out what was in there (I don't think any other deposits have survived, as far as I'm aware). But they found all sorts of things in Ephesus.
- This is Thessalonica – the second largest city in Greece, so still a vibrant city. We could have also looked at Corinth of which there's still a town of Corinth and right in the centre of the town is the, sort of like, the ruins of the old New Testament town. But Thessalonica is the one that for me still represents a bustling city that is at the heart of Greek culture, and at the heart of Greece today.

It does make me wonder: I wonder what the Christians of Colossae and Galatia and Ephesus thought when they receive their letters from Paul. Did they have a sense that we'll be here forever. We are blessed by God to receive these letters from Paul and yet look now: they're overgrown by grass and all that there is some of them is a few ruined stones. I think that as well about...there used to be a vibrant church in North Africa, and yet now the church in North Africa is

no more – North Africa is a strongly Muslim area today. None of us should ever think that the church in our country, or in the world can never be undermined or lost, in the sense of it is the faithfulness of believers that will cause the church to be sustained. Also, of course, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in this world. So I'm not saying the church will ever disappear; there may well be Christians in these areas, but they've often hidden away, they're often having to worship in secret in some of these communities because the church has died out in that denominational sense, and that sort of sense of being an institution within these societies.

So, the return of Christ was the particular preoccupation of these Christians, you know, around AD 50. They were really interested in: when is the Lord returning? Part of that was because they were experiencing persecution at that time. They were treated with suspicion and there were outbreaks, fairly local outbreaks but outbreaks all the same, of persecution. Christians were regarded with suspicion, and every now and again it would overflow into actual persecution and actual mistreatment of Christians. The full-blown persecution by the Roman Empire actually didn't happen until later, but outbreaks of localised persecution happened every now and again during this time.

The return of Christ is referred to 2000 times in the Old Testament, and 318 times in the New Testament – it's one of the most referred to issues that's referred to in the Bible: about the fact that God has a plan for the end of time as well as for today. In the New Testament one in every 25 verses refers to this issue of the return of Christ, and yet most Christians ignore it! Most Christians don't refer to it much, and those that do focus on it – well they tend to be thought of as cranks, as, you know, the ones that will wear the sort of, as you have there, the sign saying “The end of the world is nigh. Repent of your sins.” Those Christians that do focus, sometimes are seen as on the edge and a bit, you know, crackpots and, sort of like, you know, the ones “Oh don't bother having a conversation with him or her, they'll start on their favourite subject.” And yet the Bible suggests to us: this is a really important issue for us to reflect on.

So the problem in Thessalonica that the Thessalonian Christians or Salonica as it's often known these days (the name has been shortened of the city that I showed you a picture of earlier), but the problem in Thessalonica 2000 years ago: the issue was the believers were confused. They were confused, they didn't understand if Jesus is Lord, if all things are under his Lordship, why are things in this world the way they are? If God cares, and God is in charge of everything, why are things the way they are? And that's a contemporary question, isn't it: why are things in our world the way that they are? Paul actually wrote 1 Thessalonians because the believers in Thessalonica thought those who were dead would miss Christ's return.

And, as we are told in 1 Thessalonians, he refers to that and says: some may die, but all will rise at the coming of Christ. The second letter to the Thessalonians was written because they thought those who are living we going to miss it, that actually it had already happened and they hadn't known about it, and if they didn't know then perhaps Christ wouldn't take them, and they wouldn't be able to be with him when he returns. And so there was a lot of confusion amongst the Christians in Thessalonica.

This confusion was caused, as was read to us by Anna a little bit earlier in the service, it was caused by a forged letter allegedly containing a prophecy, or teaching, from Paul. And as we read these words, Paul says to the believers “Don't be easily unsettled or alarmed.” And the word there is, sort of like, they use it of a ship where the anchor slips and the ship is drifting, and so the idea is: don't start drifting and becoming alarmed, and dislodged from your anchor in Christ by some prophecy, report or letter supposedly from me (from Paul). Don't become unsettled or

alarmed.

They were also confused because there had been people misquoting, or misrepresenting, Paul's teaching about the end times about the end of the world. People were getting very anxious; we hear stories, we have references to people giving up their jobs so they can just sit and wait for the Lord to return. We know even in our lifetimes there been times that have been sects where they have said "Yep, the end of the world is going to be..." I think we had a quite a bit of that around the Millennium, and there were, you know, people who were giving prophecies about this, and the thing with those sort of prophecies is you wake up the following morning and then you have some explaining to do. And so, you know, you have sheepish people saying "Well, when I said it was going to be midnight last night, what I really meant was..." and then trying to dig themselves out of their hole.

Paul was misquoted, misrepresented and there was this forged letter. This suggests that there was intentional deceit. Somebody was intent on deceiving and confusing the believers, but there was also a lot of immature talk going on; a lot of people who were just really stirring things up by the way that they talked, and the way that they, sort of like, you know, they were a bit like...what was his name..."Don't panic Mr Mainwaring" all that...Sergeant...can't remember his name now... Jones (thank you)... "Don't panic, don't panic..." all that business, you know, of people saying let's not get agitated, but actually agitating people more by what they were saying.

So this was the problem in Thessalonica. This would probably have been quite a small fellowship and, of course, the church of the time was little pockets of Christians. And so it's not as though there was a local fellowship down the road that could come and support this fellowship in Thessalonica - it would be the next city where the closest group of believers would be. So that's why these letters from Paul and from others - John sent some letters, Peter sent some letters, but mainly from Paul - they were so important because actually this was teaching that brought clarity, and brought comfort and strength to little pockets of believers who felt surrounded by people who were antagonistic towards them.

And so this sense of being under attack was fed into by the questions that they had around the Wicked One, the Evil One as some of our Bibles express it, also known as the Lawless One, or in one of John's letters the Antichrist. And once again there has been so much noise, and so much comment, made around these issues: you may have heard people saying "Ah, Putin - he's the Antichrist" but if you look back over the centuries there have been many people: whoever has been the tyrant of the day has so often been picked out on as Antichrist. So we have to be careful how we use these terms, and decide that we know the dates, and the times, and the hours. Jesus himself specifically says "None but the Father knows the date and the times of the Lord's coming."

So we have a lot of anxiety around that issue. We are told in verses 3 and 4 of the reading that Anna read for us that the Antichrist will rebel against God and seek to replace him, seeming to have similar power and glory. And some people have suggested that it may not be a physical person who maybe Antichrist, but actually the internet with its incredible, or seemingly infinite knowledge, may actually be a representation of this Antichrist understanding. That actually it seems to be all knowing, it seems to have the answer to everything for some people.

But verse 8 reminds us, and tells us, the Antichrist will be overthrown by God. The Lawless One will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth, and destroyed by the splendour of his coming.

So there's a problem that they had - we've looked a little bit of their problem, the issues, the

worries they had, the anxieties they felt – but also it presents a problem for us as well, because in our day there is conversation about: how long will this world go on, how do we understand the times in which we live? We've spoken quite a bit about the environmental crisis that is impacting our world. You'll have heard reports like me of the fact that we may be in an existential crisis, that within the lifetime of perhaps not us but of our children, or our grandchildren, parts of our world may be uninhabitable by human beings. So these questions around “What will the end look like?” are very real for us today as well.

In Luke 21, we are told the words of Christ say after the trials, tribulations, wars and natural disasters, Luke has Christ saying “When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads because your salvation is near.” When these things begin to happen stand up and raise your heads in faith and belief, because your salvation is near. This suggest that the greatest challenge to God from evil will come just before the return of Jesus Christ. That there will be this climax of negativity and fighting against goodness just before the return of Jesus.

The problem for them and for us is: how so we know how bad things are going to get in this world? It's easy to jump to conclusions as people have done with Putin, but as people have done down through the ages, it's easy to make assumptions: the end is nigh. This happened back in about 1350: across Europe the Black Death, otherwise known as the Bubonic Plague, was at its peak. In total it killed somewhere between 75 million and 200 million people. But the population of Europe was much, much lower than it is now, so that represented between 30% and 60% of Europe's population – imagine that number of people dying in Europe, every family would have been impacted, whole communities probably were almost wiped out by the Bubonic Plague.

You may have seen the pictures of the people who believed that it was spread by miasma, by bad air, and so they'd wear those masks with the great big nose on them, and they had flowers in them because they thought, well the fresh smell of the flowers that will stop the bad air getting to me, little realising that it was the rats that ran around their feet that was spreading Bubonic Plague, and that the flowers they had in their masks were useless. But back in those days the idea that this was the end of time was rife.

So we can ask this question: is the Antichrist a person, is he an ideology? The world is becoming increasingly secularized, people are looking for answers increasingly in other places rather than looking to the Lord, and to scripture, and to Christian teaching. Or is it a build up of opposition to God believing that our technology in the end is more powerful than God, and if we look to that as our salvation, technology will bring us through, that in itself is a form of ideology: to believe that anything other than God is the one who will bring our salvation and our renewal.

I said earlier on that many people down through the centuries have been regarded as the Antichrist. During the Crusades, particularly in the 12th Century – [describing slide] this is a representation of Saladin (now his name wasn't Saladin, that's the Anglicized version of his name), but he was the Muslim warrior and leader who recaptured Jerusalem, and many Christians believed “Ah Saladin – he's the Antichrist because he has taken over Jerusalem, the Holy City, for the Muslims; the end is coming.”

In World War II many people believed Hitler was the Antichrist in what he was seeking to do in dominating the whole of Europe under the Nazi regime.

So this idea of Antichrist has been used and misused down through the centuries.

We have a reference in this passage to people who set themselves up in the place of worship, in

the temple. People who, sort of, present themselves as being God. So in verse 4: the Lord will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called god or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple proclaiming himself to be God. This idea that certain people believed they had the right to present themselves as gods to be worshipped – of course there's an obvious idea: the Caesars very much did that. This is actually not one of the Caesars, Antiochus IV Epiphanes had his image erected in the Jerusalem temple, and it's referred to in the New Testament, actually: the abomination that is placed within the temple. But he believed that he had the right to be set up a statue of him in the Holy of Holies of the Jewish temple, to be worshipped, and that was what caused one of the Jewish rebellions against the Greek occupation of the Jewish lands. And a number of the Emperors – there there was this cult of worship of the Caesars, the Roman Emperors, and Caligula himself, he tried again to set up an image of himself in the temple to be worshipped in AD 40.

It seems to me this says much more about human ambition and the sense of once you have power you get to the stage of believing that you have the right to do whatever you want. And I think that's certainly is true of Putin: he has a surrounded himself with yes-men who actually tell him that everything's going well – the war in Ukraine, we're winning it – and then when the reality comes, he realises, supposedly they may have lost up to a third of the troops that Russia sent to Ukraine – may have been killed or seriously injured. So the reality is coming home to roost for him, but initially of course he was lied to and told everything is going well.

To finished with, Jesus taught his disciples: “No one knows when that day or hour will come, neither the angels in heaven nor the son, only the father knows. Be on watch, be alert, for you do not know when the time will come.” And that is such an important teaching for us: that actually we may hear questions about “How long can this earth go on as it is now with global warming, with wars, with famines, with all sorts of things going on?” but we are called to faithful worship, we are called to live lives, holy lives.

In these verses in Mark 13, and in the verses from 2 Thessalonians that we're looking at this morning – in both of these verses we're told, in these passages, we're told that Christians should focus on living holy lives, rather than wondering, or worrying, about when the end of time may come. We're told that God knows the end from the beginning, but our calling is to be faithful in our worship and holy living throughout the years that God gives us in our lives.

Let's pray together.

Dear Lord Jesus, we hear the rumours and the noise of questioning in our media, in our conversations, particularly that we hear from media commentators about the troubles that are happening in this world. But Lord God we pray that you will help us to focus on living lives that bring glory to you, focus on sharing your good news with those around us in our daily lives. That Lord God we may be true and honest witnesses to your goodness, even in a world that seems to be so impacted by the ambitions of human beings. Lord God, direct us and show us the way forward in our daily lives. We pray these things in your name Lord Jesus, Amen.