

# God Inspires, Leads and Forgives

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*A sermon given on the Second Sunday before Advent, 19th November 2023 – by the Revd Gordon Smethurst, in Beverley Minster*

*1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30*

There seems to be so much resentment about these days. Perhaps people see the rich getting absurdly rich year by year and the ordinary people suffering to pay household bills and all done legally. Others may have been burgled or assaulted or cheated by people who most of the time do not seem to get caught or punished. Others have seen their promotion prospects taken away by a bully or a liar or a seducer, and not for the first time. Or they may have been the victim of a hit and run driver or a long national health waiting list. And some may simply have got married and rued the day: remember in *Les Misérables*, Thénardier, the contemptible little innkeeper boasts of his clever cunning but unfortunately for him his wife joins in and sings, "I used to dream that I would meet a prince", looks at him and back at the audience and sings, "Lord Almighty, look what's happened since."

This resentment can build up in the innocent victims and they long for some way of expressing their disappointment, their rejection. I had a colleague some years back who was a fine parish priest and he was dynamic - he would have been inspiring to our deanery, but he was hardly ever there because he is always protesting about something the bishops were up to now which didn't involve parish priests. But I blame the bishops - they shouldn't have ordained an ex-trade union convener. Our society is awash with a sense of injustice about colour, about gender, about carbon footprint. It seems to be bursting out in a cancel culture which seeks to target and ruin the people who are just quietly getting on with their lives and their jobs.

Well, the Jews in Bible time had a lot to be resentful about. Joseph led them into a life of ease in Egypt, the following Pharaoh enslaved them. They escaped with Moses but had to spend time in the desert. And then when they entered the promised land, they had to fight their way in. And once in, the Holy Land lay on the path between Egypt and its soldiers in the south and Assyria, Syria and Babylon, Persia in the north, and then later the Greeks and the Romans in the west. They were forever being trampled over, raped and pillaged. And so, understandably they began to say, look, we are the chosen people of the Lord. So in that case, there has to be a time when this stuff is over and there will be a last day when all them lot, which includes us lot, will get our comeuppance and we, the chosen people, will end up top dogs.

Sadly, this undercurrent in the Jewish faith of seeking revenge upon evildoers and the fulfilment of pride of the chosen people carried over into the early Christian Church. And Jesus, believed to be the Messiah, was therefore automatically part of this great day of Judgement. Even now, there'll be people, particularly Adventists, who'll be trying to work out precisely the day when it's going to happen and history is going to come to an end, and Jesus and the holy people are going to triumph.

There was a sketch by Cambridge Footlights in, I think the 1960s. In the sketch, this group of Adventists had gone up on a mountaintop there to watch us get what was coming to us. And they'd worked well, they'd prepared, they had clothes, they had things to drink, and they had tins and tins and tins, because they didn't know how long Armageddon was going to take. And so taking frozen stuff was no use. And they settled down to wait for us lot to get what we deserved. But then a panic rippled through the group, because several suddenly remembered that on their kitchen top, or in the coat they'd left behind, was the tin opener. Eventually, the time came and the countdown to the last day began -5-4-3-2-1- and through an uncomfortable silence, a little voice was heard, "It was Greenwich, meantime, wasn't it, Ebenezer?"

The sketch showed how ridiculous this undercurrent was. But people are still getting up and preaching sermons with great vigour and rancour. The joke is told that Dr. Ian Paisley of Northern Ireland fame, quoting the words at the end of the Gospel, 'There will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.' - And down in about the fifth pew, a pensioner grinned up on him, and he hadn't got a tooth in his noddle - 'Weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, and teeth will be provided.'

The sad thing is that this is not the heart of the gospel or of the New Testament. Paul says, "Faith, hope, love, - these abide, and the greatest of them all is love. Not patience, justice, revenge. Jesus said to the thief on the cross "Today, will you be with me in paradise." And when he told the parable of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man and the poor man at his gate, the rich man was regretting his life in hell there and then.

What the Gospel tells us is that judgement is constant and present and ongoing all the time. Not something to look forward in a bloody battle. but every moment of the day is when God, not so much judges, but inspires and leads and forgives. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom, but those who do the will of my Father."

The Victorian Bishop Barnes, told the story of a young girl dying of consumption. When she was eleven, her mother died, and she worked her fingers literally to the bone, looking after her brothers and sisters and her grieving father. When the church visitors heard that she was seriously ill, they rushed round to save her soul. "My dear" said the visitor, "but you stopped

coming to Sunday school, and you never joined a confirmation class. What can you say when you meet your maker?" Slowly, the girl drew one red, bony, calloused hand and then the other, and put them on the top of the blanket: "I'll show him my hands" she said.

# Reading Texts

## 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup> For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! <sup>4</sup> But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; <sup>5</sup> for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; <sup>7</sup> for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. <sup>9</sup> For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup> who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. <sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

## Matthew 25:14-30

*<sup>14</sup> 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup> to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup> The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup> In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup> But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup> After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." <sup>21</sup> His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." <sup>22</sup> And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." <sup>23</sup> His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." <sup>24</sup> Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." <sup>26</sup> But his master replied,*

*“You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup> Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup> For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup> As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*