

Second Sunday before Advent

The day of the Lord

5 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, 'Peace and safety', destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1Thessalonians 5:11)

Usually, at this time of year, there's a sense of expectation. However hard we might try not to fall for the hype and commercialism we're generally thinking about planning Christmas celebrations by mid-November. But this year is different. Yes, Christmas is coming but we don't know exactly what to expect. We're in lockdown and any plans we make are dependent on the management of Coronavirus. It's meant to be a finite lockdown this time, for a month only, but that doesn't mean that things will get back to normal in December. We're learning to live with uncertainty.

So too were the Thessalonians in this Sunday's epistle. They'd come to know about Jesus when Paul and his friends had visited them. They'd committed themselves to living a Christlike life with the expectation that when Jesus came among them they'd be granted eternal life in his perfect kingdom. That was the plan and they were looking forward to it. But it didn't seem to be happening. In fact it was taking so long to happen there was concern because some members of their community were dying without having met the risen Jesus. So Paul, in this section of his letter to the people of Thessalonica, was having to persuade them to keep focused. They were going to have to live with the uncertainty of not knowing exactly when or how Christ would come again.

So Paul gave them some advice as to how to manage their hopes and expectations. He told them to 'encourage one another and build each other up' and added 'just as you are doing'. The Christians in Thessalonica functioned in community and it was the characteristics that made them a community, their love and care for one another, which would help them to look forward in hope despite the uncertainty.

It's our relationship to each other in our communities which will help us to see a future beyond the pandemic too. We saw in the last lockdown how the village communities and the church community supported one another. Even if we can't make plans to see our families or to gather all our relations around the table, we are part of one Christian fellowship, and as followers of Jesus we know that, despite the uncertainties, his presence in our lives brings us together and gives us hope for the future. So instead of dwelling on our unfulfilled expectations may we remember that like the Thessalonians we are children of light and follow their example by encouraging one another and building each other up.

Ann Barlow