

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

**Luke 20.27-38**

**6<sup>th</sup> November 2022**



## **Shaken, not Stirred**

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*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

There is, today I think, an insatiable appetite for so called *Breaking News*. Getting it out first must be every reporters dream.

A few weeks ago it was reported with some certainty that the Coronation would be on June 2<sup>nd</sup> next year, the King would be crowned exactly 70 years to the day after his mother. June 2<sup>nd</sup> was the date. You heard it here first.

By the evening Buckingham Palace stepped in and said it was all mere speculation. Yet still for a few days the news outlets pedalled the date as authoritative, they even embellished it with the certainty that it would be accompanied by a Bank Holiday, and so the story got traction.

Perhaps it was no surprise to seasoned news watchers that, after a few days of all this hyped up predicting, the palace quietly and calmly announced that the Coronation is to be May 6<sup>th</sup>.

I saw no apology in the news outlets for the frenzy of ill-founded speculation they had caused, instead it was quickly forgotten, and everyone moved on.

Well, *knowing the date* is nothing new. Especially if you know it but no one else appears to. There's a certain sort of power in that!

During a Manse Exchange to Washington DC, I'd regularly tune in to the Sunday Morning TV shows. One Sunday an old preacher, sitting in a leather chair with his leather-bound bible open on his knee, predicted that the Second Coming would happen in two weeks' time. As there was no mass hysteria following this revelation, I sensed such predictions were commonplace. My one disappointment was the expected date, he said, was to be just after we'd flown home, so I never saw the Sunday programme on which he'd have to explain the *no show!*

There was an expectation in the Early Church that Jesus would return soon, in their lifetimes in fact.

We might be aware of that liturgical phrase: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*. And we might interpret it in a variety of ways, not all of them necessarily literal. Yet

for the early Christians it usually was literal. So, it didn't take much for rumours to reach fever pitch, or even for the notion to be take root that Christ had already returned.

And it's into this febrile atmosphere that 2 Thessalonians is written. And it's as if the author wants to cut through these Chinese Whispers, all predicting times and seasons of a Second Coming, with Corporal Jones' words in Dad's Army *Don't Panic*.

Because they were. They were panicking. So, what does verse 2 of 2 Thessalonians 2 say: *do not suddenly lose your heads, do not be alarmed by any prophetic utterances*.

You can almost smell the fear. Their anxiety about the future was palpable.

That phrase to *lose your heads* literally means, in the Greek, to be *shaken*.

In a report published in March of this year it was said that two out of every five young Britons is not confident about the future.

And maybe as we get older even more of us feel paralyzed, scared, or uncertain about what's in store for us.

We are shaken by life, as every generation has been; whether that's through war, natural disaster, financial crisis, a personal health scare or bereavement.

I don't quite see the attraction of the Crystal Ball tent at the Fun Fair. Indeed, knowing the future would probably be too much for most of us. For we need to tread gently, incrementally, into all our tomorrows.

So, Thessalonians contemplates the future, and knowing how much those tomorrows can worry us, the writer goes on to say at the end of today's passage: *Stand firm, my friends, hold fast to your traditions...look to the Lord Jesus Christ who has shown us such love and given us such unfailing encouragement and hope...*

With apologies to those James Bond fans out there, we will, as we walk into the future, be *shaken*, but we don't have to be *stirred*. We don't have to panic and, in the words of today's reading: *lose our heads*.

Now our Gospel reading today also touches on the theme of tomorrow and the anxiety that the future can bring.

It's almost risible that Jesus is hijacked by two warring factions of the religious elite of his day with a ludicrous scenario they ask him to judge. In short, a woman who has been married seven times goes to heaven and the most pressing question they discuss is: whose wife will she be in the afterlife?

This passage shows us how easy it is to ask the wrong questions, even though we misguidedly believe them to be the most important questions.

Jesus, as it were, says: Waaaaayyy...where did this come from? Is this all you can think about? Haven't you missed the bigger picture? It's as if Jesus is saying: You are thinking of

heaven as an extension of earth, but it isn't.

Although we have pictures of there being many rooms and a place prepared for us, of a welcome that includes the greeting: *my good and faithful servant*. The Bible essential talks of heaven in poetry, not prose

Heaven has about it a sense of worship and an enfolding of us, in love, by God. Yet it remains a mystery. So, no, Jesus refused to play their game and allocate the seven times bereaved wife to a particular husband.

Whilst I was preparing this sermon, I had the privilege of attending a Shabbat service at the Synagogue in Maidenhead. It their beautiful liturgy for a Friday night, Sabbath Eve service there was this line: *You are the endless power that renews life beyond the grave. You are the greatness that saves.*

And this was the footnote in the service book belonging to that particular line, it read: *Our tradition (this is the reformed Jewish one) assumes that life exists for us beyond the grave but without dogmatic views on its form. The repeated phrase that God 'brings the dead to life', or as we express it, 'gives life beyond death', applies both to awakening daily and to this future existence.*

I found that commentary both honest and helpful. Heaven is a mystery for us all, best spoken of in poetry. Yet, just as God, as it were, breathes new life into every morning as we awake, so he carries and sustains us as we walk through the doorway of death into eternity.

Now, when I read a passage like today's, I have this picture in my mind of what might be happening *off camera* as Jesus walks away with his disciples.

I mean, did the likes of Peter, James and John quiz him afterwards and ask: *So, what did you really think about that question and those who asked it?*

Of course, these would be intriguing conversations, but they aren't recorded.

So, here's how I think it might have gone that day. Jesus might have sighed as he walked away and turned to the likes of Peter and said: *Well, I never saw that one coming. Is that all they can be worried about, an artificial conundrum obviously designed to trip me up. All they want from me are incriminating sound bites. These religious leaders, what are they like? They spend so much on looking the part and saying long prayers, yet they ignore the poor. You know the other day they stood there criticising a poor widow for her meagre offering as she entered the temple, failing to grasp she gave God her last penny. They just don't seem to understand what God is all about.*

It's in this Lukan passage that Jesus, I think, seeks to re-frame our thinking about tomorrow, the future and heaven. And he does so by using the phrase: *God is not God of the dead, but of the living; in his sight all are alive.*

Maybe he's just shown what he means by that in talking of Moses standing at the Burning Bush, encountering God and saying not that *God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, but God IS their God today, right here and now. Of course, we exist in time, yet God is both part of our time and outside of time. So, whether we live or die, whether our location is earth or heaven, we belong to God, we are loved by God, we are blessed and held by

God. In both this time defined life, and in the timelessness of eternity, God is with us, and is always our God.

So, in the light of today's readings, when the future begins to both panic and confuse us, what is our response?

Well, firstly I believe we need to take seriously that line from the Lord's Prayer that goes: *May your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.*

I have no doubt that Jesus would have been far more impressed by the so called religious elite of his day if they had striven to bring some of the peace, love and justice of heaven down to earth, so that it made a difference to the life of that poor widow going up to say her prayers in the temple, rather than presenting Jesus with eschatological tongue twisters.

And then, from the Thessalonians passage, there are those beautiful words that bring us perspective and peace when the future seems overwhelming.

The writer says, when tomorrow seems so choppy, *stand firm and hold on to this tradition...*

And what is that tradition, and what are those truths that will see us through our fears and anxieties? Thessalonians says it's a belief in God's love, God's unfailing encouragement and God's sure hope. These eternal truths will see us through, so that we can both face the future with confidence and live in the present in a spirit of compassionate service.

As the hymn puts it, this is the God who gives us *Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow.*

May it be so, in the name of God, the God of life.

Amen.

*Amersham: 4<sup>th</sup> November 2022*