

An Address by Nigel Guthrie, 25 October 2020

Tina and I were very fortunate to get away to Wales for a few days this week and to stay in a cottage right next to the river Usk. So instead of hearing the noise of traffic on New North Road in the morning and the sound of merry makers piling out of the Imperial in the evening all we could hear was the sound of birdsong and river tumbling over the stones and rocks. It was very much the same sound that our grandparents, and their grandparents might have heard. The scene was timeless, serene and beautiful. It reminded me just how reassuring the natural world has been during these months dominated by the pandemic, and how much we should value and protect the green spaces around us.

But, of course the scene was not unchanging. As we spent a few days there we noticed that the red brown of the tree crowns were increasingly heralding the autumn and coming winter. And the river was different every day. After Wednesday's rain the rock in the river on which a dipper had been bobbing the previous day had completely disappeared under the current. And the couple who owned the cottage were upset that they would have to turn away the guests who had booked in over the next few weeks due to the Welsh lockdown. Even amongst the serenity of this Welsh valley we could not escape completely the realities of life and the inexorable passage of time.

In our readings from Matthew's gospel we have reached the section where Jesus warns his hearers of the end times. He gives them a series of pictures. Just as the tender stems and new shoots of the fig tree show that summer is near so the signs of the Son of Man show that a time of judgement is coming. Jesus needed to warn his hearers so that they could be prepared. Warnings are never comfortable but they are necessary, just like the bends ahead sign by the road!

These warnings of the end times are always disturbing to read, but perhaps they are especially disturbing at the moment when events in our world seem to be pointing to a time of trial and judgement. Covid 19 infection is on the increase and it seems that this country and many parts of the world will be very hard pressed in the coming months. Will we as individuals and as a country respond with compassion and kindness or will we seek to protect ourselves and not be so concerned about others?

And the changing climate points us to the possibility that all will not be well with our world unless we change radically the patterns of our life and especially of our

consumption. The recent apocalyptic film by David Attenborough is a reminder that time is getting short for our human family to mend its ways.

Living in these times of warning and threat takes a toll on us all. How are we to live sustainably, not only in terms of the environment, but also in our emotional welfare and our relationships? Jesus says at the end of the Gospel reading ‘Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away.’ Resting in the word of God and allowing its meaning to move from our heads to our hearts is always a significant aspect of the Christian life, but now more so than ever. On this Bible Sunday it is good to think about our own reading of the bible and listening to it. Are we digging deeply enough into it to find the nourishment and strength we need to sustain us? (if you would like to use Bible reading notes these can be ordered through Ann Barnett and if you would like to dig deeper with others do join us for our Tuesday Bible Study in the psalms on Zoom in November.)

Today’s reading from Colossians gives us further guidance in how we might approach living in a time of warning and crisis. Paul urges us his hearers to clothe ourselves with some wonderful gifts: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. They are gifts to which we all aspire even if we don’t always manage to showcase them! Paul then advocates forgiveness; that we should forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven us; just like in the Lord’s Prayer. He then reminds us to put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Finally in the passage Paul emphasizes the central place of thanksgiving in the Christian life. ‘With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.’ It has been a great loss to churches of all traditions that congregational singing has not been allowed due to the risk of Covid transmission. But it is great to have welcomed our choirs back in their distanced forms and perhaps their singing can remind us all of the joy of singing which will return in due course. Paul returns to that theme of gratitude in his final phrase too, ‘Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’

When we take time and trouble to thank God it doesn’t mean that we are closing our minds and hearts to what is wrong or painful around us or within us. But it does mean that we continue to let our minds dwell on the love and goodness of God or we might say, to abide in God’s love and goodness. Sustaining ourselves in testing times is essential if we are to support those around us and be of service. So switching off from the news, finding space to enjoy the natural world and whatever brings us joy is good. We cannot and should not ignore the warnings which come to us, but as we

face them we must always keep in mind the goodness of God and his love shown to us in Jesus - and give thanks.