

What do Ostriches do best?!

[Zephaniah 1^{7,12-end}; Psalm 90¹⁻⁸] 1 Thessalonians 5¹⁻¹¹; Matthew 25¹⁴⁻³⁰

When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them. [1 Thessalonians 5³]

What do ostriches do? First thing to mind - bury their heads in the sand! If there is any area of doctrine in which the Church follows the example of the ostrich and buries its head in the sand it is relating to the anticipation of the return of Jesus, a teaching that is stated consistently and repeatedly through the New Testament.

I do understand that there are fashions in theology and that this area is not currently in vogue.

I also understand that (in the tradition in which I was brought up, at least) the doctrine of the second coming of Christ was a very heavy and a very blunt stick with which non-believers were bludgeoned and that the threat of judgement was a very effective means of getting Christians to behave.

I confess that I never heard (in my youth) any sermon on the text, **For God destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ**, but I did hear many sermons on the possibility, even the probability, of being thrown **into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**. (lighter?)

Our task today is to weave together Paul's teaching about the end of time and Jesus' teaching on how to prepare for that: no burying of heads here.

If 2020 has taught us anything it is that we can't depend on the future and even the present is questionable! **Peace and security** was assumed, and then a tiny, invisible virus arrived **like a thief in the night** and stole our certainties and confidence and may yet steal our Christmass!

- ✘ The challenge that the expectation of the immanent return of Jesus and the inauguration of God's direct rule in **the Day of the Lord** is quite simple really: to live now in such a way that living with God won't be a shock to us or to Him!

The certainty of the Return of Christ is a hopeful promise to those who are **children of light** and only a threat to those who are not: how you understand **there will be no escape**. The emphasis in Paul's teaching is clear: **you are not in darkness; you are all children of light and children of the day; 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; for God destined us not for wrath but for obtaining Salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ; whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him**. So Paul tells us, **therefore encourage one another and build up each other**: because that is what hope does!

- ✘ The story Jesus tells has the clear point that, while we wait for the return of the Master, those trusted with continuing his work should engage creatively and fruitfully with that task.

The **talent** that the **Master** distributed – 5, 2 and 1 to his **slaves** – were valuable, probably tens of thousands in our time. These weren't gifts, because a return was expected. The **wicked and lazy slave** knew this – **I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed**. Fear seems to have overtaken his senses so he did not **invest money with the bankers** to get **interest**.

When Christ returns – for that is the obvious meaning in this story – we, his **slaves**, will not be judged on our carefulness but on our faithfulness. We are not expected to substitute security for service. It is not our intention that God cares about but our effectiveness!

It is always good to get feedback on sermons and a few weeks ago, amongst appreciative comments on sermons being based on the readings, I was challenged to make a comment on the Collect, the prayer at the beginning that sets the scene and sums up the Sunday in the Lectionary. There are two Collects set for each Sunday – the traditional one that we generally use and a shorter, pithier one. The alternative one for today is:

Heavenly Father, you long for the world's salvation: stir us from apathy, restrain us from excess and revive us in new hope that all creation will one day be healed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

'Stir us from apathy' is, in my experience, much more urgent and necessary than 'restrain us from excess'! Unless we think that we have all the time in the world and will never be held to account! But then, ostriches do exist!