

Practically Atheist as Christians!

Jeremiah 33¹⁴⁻¹⁶; Psalm 25¹⁻⁹; 1 Thessalonians 3^{9-end}; Luke 21²⁵⁻³⁶

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. [1 Thessalonians 3¹⁰]

I was on a panel of different faiths recently answer year 9 questions – A Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and me. At the end we were asked what one thing we would want the students to remember. I reminded them that I had said that Jesus said he had come so that we would have life and have it to the full. The Muslim said, ‘remember that God sees everything you do and so make the right choices, and that God still sees the things that you do in private so we have to make the right choices there too.’ I confess that I was immediately transported back to the warnings my Grannie issued such warnings during my adolescent years.

I have reflected on this in preparation for today and am left wondering whether, as Christians, we live, practically, as atheists? How conscious are we that time, because it is finite, will end and that we will have to answer for our thoughts, words and actions? How conscious are we of God in our everyday life and how do we engage with God in a way that genuinely impacts the choices we make?

This fits with the theme of Advent as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming as a baby but his second coming in majesty. The challenge that Paul sets down is that we **may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus**. He is clear enough when he says, **how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel before God because of you?** But he is also quite realistic about the Thessalonian Christians when, having assured them of his prayers, Paul goes on to say that he needs to meet **face to face** so that he can **restore whatever is lacking in your faith**.

Is that a question we are prepared to ask of ourselves? ***What is lacking in my faith?***

- ✘ How hopeful are we? That's what Jeremiah (not known for his positivity or hope) sets out when from the 6th century BC as he anticipates the

Messiah from the house of David who will **execute justice and righteousness**.

Hope sets Christians apart from others – whatever is happening to us or around us, hope (that God knows what he is doing) defines us.

- ✘ How trusting are we? The Psalmist is clear when he says, **O my God, in you I trust**. He trusts God that his **enemies will not triumph over him** and that God will **remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions** but that **all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies**.

Trust is key – it shows that we do not rely on ourselves (that we aren't practically atheist), but rely on God.

- ✘ How holy are we? That is what Paul challenges us with – because only when we are **holy** will we be **blameless**.

How much of Jesus do people see when they meet us – the holier we become the more of Jesus is seen in us (it is something that comes from within and not the false piety or religiosity that is fake).

- ✘ How prayerful are we? Jesus says that this is the key to living as people of faith and not as practical atheists: **be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man**.

When we pray we hand things over to God and accept his answer and know that he knows best.

We have come here because we know we need God and we know that our faith needs strengthening – we aren't atheists and we know that we cannot cope in life or face death on our own. Advent may be seen as a warm-up for Christmas when we receive the baby Jesus (all soft and containable) but it is also the preparation for when we see Jesus face-to-face (not so soft and certainly not containable), so that we anticipate that with joy rather than fear.