

## KNOW YOUR GOD

### 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Today is a sombre day, and perhaps even more so than usual for Remembrance Sunday, as we enter a second national lockdown. Not only do we commemorate the sacrifice and heartbreak of those we have lost in the wars of the past century, but due to the pandemic we are not even able to gather and remember our loved ones in unity and fellowship as we have done for decades. As we near 2021, we may even have worries and trepidation for the coming months and years, thinking to ourselves “when will this end?” Peering into our computer screens, or listening on our phones, the novelty of which may have been amusing in the early weeks of online services, especially with the occasional technical meltdown, is probably now for most of us quite wearying, draining, and seemingly never-ending. This plague affects our past, our present and our future.

Watching the news back in April, I remember being caught off guard by the words of a few war veterans, including Captain Tom Moore, as they described life in the pandemic as worse than in the second world war. I'm sure those of us who never actually experienced life in war-time have heard stories from those who did – descriptions of battlefield carnage and decimated civilian life as the country and communities tried to rally together for mutual support amid the desperation. Today, covid has stopped us from commemorating the past in the way we are used to. Churches and memorial sites across the nation would normally be bursting with extra people today who would not ordinarily attend a church service on a Sunday morning, but do so to pay their deepest respect for those who paid the ultimate price, sacrificing their own lives for the sake of something greater than themselves. Though today we miss the sight of uniformed organisations and those who wear with pride their or their relatives' military medals, we must still honour the past and what this day represents.

St Paul spoke of something not so dissimilar in his letter to the Thessalonians. He wrote at a time of great persecution within the Roman empire, where Christians who stood up for their faith, who stood up for the gospel, who stood up for what was right, were brought down by the sword. These martyrs would become venerated as saints, commemorated by the early Church and even prayed to generations later. Paul even tells the church in Thessalonica not to grieve for those who have died in the past, for they have a greater hope which conquers grief. Those who laid down their lives for Christ as Christ laid down his life for theirs, should be celebrated for their great faith. We too should remember these early Christians who, though it cost them their lives, selflessly passed down the gospel of Jesus that we could still share and celebrate it today in freedom, in the same way we remember those who more recently gave their lives for our freedom. Nothing should stop us from doing so.

So – how could Captain Tom and these veterans say that coronavirus is worse than the events we commemorate every single year? Well, in their words, “we knew what we were fighting against.” The threat and the motive was plain for all to see. “But with this disease,” they continued, “we're fighting against an invisible enemy.” Covid is, of course, affecting our present as well as our past. It is among us now, lurking out of sight. We don't know who might be carrying it, or even how much affect it would have on us if we did catch it. It has no motive, and for the moment at least, no cure. It is sending areas of the world yoyoing in and out of different levels of lockdown, something we as a nation know a little about, for fear of it spreading and causing more chaos and harm. It is spoiling all areas of our present lives – work, church, weddings, funerals, parties, pastoral support...

2000 years ago, the church in Thessalonica would also have needed to “lockdown” at times when the persecution became more severe, and great wisdom would have been sought to know when and where to actually preach the gospel, break bread, and baptise new believers. It would have seemed perfectly logical to treat every non-Christian as an enemy – potentially someone who could report them and ultimately have them killed. It would have been easy and tempting to give up on church altogether and resort to self-interest, like we saw a glimpse of in the early days of the pandemic with panic buying, stockpiling and hoarding. But Paul instructs them to be different, to persist in their faith, and encourage each other when hope seemed lost. Paul even specifies earlier in this chapter that the love of God within them should affect their behaviour towards each other and towards outsiders. Perhaps it's tempting for us today to see other people as our enemies, who, if they get within two metres of us, have potential to cause us harm. We must, like the Thessalonians, be united

in love, and seek God's wisdom of how best to lovingly serve one another, especially the vulnerable and the lonely, and especially in the coming weeks.

But covid affects our future too. I hate to say it, but we know what festival is just around the corner now. Shops are stocked with displays of decorations, gifts, and yuletide food, both the delicious mince pies and the evil brussels sprouts. If we were honest, even before this new lockdown, how many of us have worried about what's going to happen at Christmas? Where we might go, who we might be with, whether anything will be allowed and indeed safe. Trinity College is usually emptied as students scurry back to their hometowns to be with family. Megan and I are coming to terms with the reality that we'll probably have to substitute the intimacy of our hometown family and friends for the mundanity of Christmas week cooped up in our little flat, doing quiz after quiz on zoom. But we also know the reality that we could have it much worse. For those living alone, Christmas is often the one time of the year when they're guaranteed to have some familial fellowship. But this year, who knows? And then there's next year. Vaccines aren't expected to be ready until at least the summertime. Many thousands of workers will be worrying about their finances and job security, and whether they'll have enough money to keep a roof over their head and food on the table. This virus is killing our future.

But! There is one area of our future that covid can't touch – our hope of the promised life in unity with Christ. This is an untouchable hope for every man, woman and child, in every corner of the world, from every era and age. Paul said to the Thessalonians, "for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died... For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise. We who are alive will be caught up with them, and so we will be with the Lord forever." What a hope we have – as the world struggles in the darkness, let the light of this hope shine in our lives, and in the lives of all who truly know their God.

Captain Tom said, "coronavirus is worse than war because we can't see our enemy," echoing the words of that great prophetess, Kylie Minogue, who famously said, "better the devil you know". It is better to know who, what and where our enemy is. As a notorious arachnophobe, I've been known to leap almost ten feet in the air when caught off guard by an eight-legged demon, and I've broken many an object defending myself from the heartless monsters. If one gets away and hides under the furniture, I cannot stay in that room until it is found and defeated! (Megan takes them outside.) Captain Tom was right: yes it is important to know our enemy, in the same way I'd rather be able to see a spider on the wall than know that there's one hiding somewhere I can't see. But it's so much more important to know our God, king of heaven and earth. In Jesus's parable, the bridegroom sent away the foolish bridesmaids saying "truly I do not know you." Know your God, who through Jesus has already won the day, light has already defeated darkness, life has already beaten death. Although on this day we remember those we've lost in the past, we struggle amid our present situations, and worry about what the future holds, we can still hold fast to God as he holds fast to us, living in the hope that one day we will be fully with the Lord, forever. Know your enemy, but more so, know your God.

Let's pray...

Father we thank you for this everlasting hope that conquers all fear. Thank you that the battle is already won. Please help us in the coming weeks to hold fast to you as you hold fast to us. When we fear, help us to be still and know that you are God. Amen.