

Sermon 19 November 2017 Sarah Thomas

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Matthew 25:14-30

Every autumn I say: This will be the year....the year I will design and implement a beautiful display of flowering bulbs and every year I fail. Instead I have random but lovely clumps of bulbs that do come up every year, that need no intervention from me, and just the darkness of the earth to grow.

I have a wonderful new small book of prayers which encourages us to reclaim the night, for God let there be darkness as well as light. We rest at night. We have conversations in the dark that can't happen in the day. We see stars and luminescence during darkness. We ache for solace, comfort and consolation at night. We sleep, lay down memory, rebuild our strength during darkness.

Samuel was called by God at night time. God speaks to his people in dreams.

Darkness can be good, a place of growth.

And yet.....

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians warns them (and us) about sleepwalking through life. He talks about a darkness that is about complacency not growth. He tells us to beware of believing in the phrase 'peace and security'. How modern that sounds. It was the comforting phrase that the Roman Empire used, that the occupying forces of Rome brought peace and security. Paul attacks it, don't trust it he says, the world will descend into convulsions, bringing terror and destruction. Within 20 years he was proved right. And as we look around the world today and our small part of it, the 'peace and security' that we have known feels under threat, chaos doesn't seem that far away. Paul warns us not to put our trust in the false security of Empires, of Government promises, not to stay asleep. Instead, he advises we wake up, see that the light of Christ is the new dawn, and to live in that light.

Jesus' last parable in Matthew's gospel warns us about being thrown out of the light into the darkness.

It is easy to read the parable as being about how we use our gifts, that we should be investing them for God's Kingdom. But I'd like to explore some of the things that are hidden here that would have been obvious to the original readers.

This parable can be seen to be about the people of Israel. The people Jesus' mission was principally aimed at. God had chosen the people of Israel. He had brought them out of slavery from Egypt. Led by Moses they had received the law, the 10 Commandments. Moses had led them to the promised land, and led by Joshua they had occupied Canaan and had flourished. Led by David and Solomon, they had built the Temple in Jerusalem which was the sign of God's presence with them. They had been given wonderful promises that God would bless them and that through them God would bless the world. BUT they had buried those promises, kept them to themselves. When Jesus talks earlier in the gospel in the sermon on the mount, he describes the chosen people of God as being the light of the world, he said that you don't put a light under a basket, but on a lampstand so that all can benefit from the light. However, the people had kept that light for themselves. They had hoarded God's promises for themselves. They had been worthless slaves and would be cast out into darkness.

What is it about fear that had caused them to do this? What stops us from being part of God's overflowing grace and love? Why do we want to keep it to ourselves? We know it's not easy, that Jesus wasn't a do-good law abider, he wasn't gentle Jesus meek and mild, he was challenging. He came for the dispossessed, the outcasts, the sick and the frightened. What makes us afraid of sharing what we know?

Is it that we will make mistakes? Is that we don't think we can measure up to some idea of perfection? Are we like Adam and Eve, hiding from God because we know we live lives that aren't quite as they should be?

For if we live in fear, live in the dark if you like, then we find that the gifts God has given us won't grow. If we are cautious with them, they won't grow. You know, God isn't something to be afraid of. The worthless slave was afraid. God trusts us. Jesus will go to any lengths for us. He will hold our hands in the middle of our fear. He has been there. For we shouldn't forget that when Jesus speaks in this parable of being cast out, being thrown into darkness, he himself was about to go into the darkness, where he would feel abandoned by God when he was dying on the Cross.

Paul encourages us to use the armour against fear that God gives us. He describes the breastplate of faith and love. Faith being the belief in Jesus that protects as arrows of doubt and despair, adverse circumstances, personal tragedy or triumph that encourages arrogance and pride, come shooting towards us. Love being love, and the helmet of salvation that protects us as we know we have already been rescued.

Darkness can be the time when we face the nearness or otherwise of God. When we wonder what God thinks of the mistakes we have made, when any pain or fear we have, grows bigger. It can become a place of fear. Darkness can be the time when we need that armour. It can be the time when we need to remember the encouraging words we have heard from others. When we remember the gift of laughter. The time when the Holy Spirit holds out a hand of grace to draw us into hope. Maybe convicting us that there are areas where we might move, change, repent and live in line with his good and perfect will. Leading us to hope and freedom. Enabling us to move away from the inner voice of condemnation that stifles the way we use our gifts. Moving us away from despair and hopelessness. And if you are in that place today, we can offer you the ministry of laying on of hands for healing, with a simple prayer during communion.

God made us to be a blessing. To repay evil with good, mistrust with grace and fear with joy. To develop a currency of goodness and kindness rather than a currency of grievance. Though that's not a pressure to keep the peace at any cost, but a determination to put effort into listening to others, discerning their strengths and needs and learning about our own.

Amen