

VPBC Sermon (10.30 am) Geoff Thorington-Hassell.
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Don't fall asleep at the wheel.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Be ready for the Lord's Coming.

What we think the future does or doesn't hold influences our behaviour now and shapes how and what we build and invest in. If our sense of the future is strictly limited to the here and now we might as well make the most of now. So "eat drink and be merry." The pleasure principle. This is born out by the release this week of the *Social Trends Survey* comparing 2008 (just before the recession hit) and 1970. Household debts went up 125% whereas household incomes only went up 40%. There are more credit cards circulation than people living on these islands.

With this borrowed money there is also a significant shift on what we spent it on. Much more now goes on services than goods (even if the price of white fish has gone up 1,700%). This means a move away from spending on needs to wants - experiences rather than things. Britons now spend nine times more on recreation and culture. Our patterns of consumption are about how we can enhance our every day experiences – even in the context of our own homes (for instance upgrading TV and sound systems) We save just 1.7% of our resources – the lowest since records began.

Yet this debt fuelled, short term consumerism is not the whole story. Society is also made uneasy by longer term trends reflected in what some critics have labelled "millennial angst." Here are a few examples. You can add your own later.

Scaremongers:

Secular doomsday theorists.

Nuclear war

Although few people think about it now thermonuclear war was a big issue particularly with the Cuban missile crises in the 1960's (I was too young to be worried by this) and the acceleration of the arms race in the 1980's (I was old enough to be very aware of this) which meant a great deal of money and effort was spent trying to prevent war by making it unthinkable and surviving (no one expected to win it) by digging deep shelters. These are now being sold off for mushroom farms. Even a one megaton air burst (some Russian war heads were 50 megatons) over Westminster would have flattened Bow with 1,000 mile an hour winds in the blast and the heat of the fire ball would have started an uncontrollable fire storm amongst the wreckage. Now we worry about dirty bombs let off by terrorists as arms reduction treaties reduce the size of nuclear arsenals even further and of nuclear proliferation with countries nutty enough to use them.

Dangerous science.

The millennial bug

Who remembers the millennial bug in 2000? With promises of planes falling out of the sky, utility services failing and the financial world in collapse, governments grinding to a halt because of computer programming language unable to properly read 1999 becoming 1900 rather than 2000 rendering the wired world we were already then living in in free fall. Some families stocked up on three months of baked beans and headed for remote self sustainable crofts to escape the melt down.

Large Hadron Collider

Under a mountain in Switzerland the Large Hadron Collider machine was to be switched on smashing one particle into another to discover how the birth of the universe may have happened. But there was a significant minority worrying that it could either create micro black holes and suck us all in or trigger dangerous stranglets (or strange matter) which would cause the earth to become a neutron star. Game over if that was the case.

Climate change

Then there is runaway climate change which could end up making the planet look like Venus – earth’s current evil twin sister.

Cultural story (re)telling

This includes end of the world ideas in films including asteroid strikes , to post apocalyptic survival movies like *2012*, *28 days later*, *The Road* - where folk eke out survival in the ruins and chaos of civilisation collapse.

Speculation

But Christianity (and other religions) also have end of the world beliefs. Indeed the Second Coming of Christ is part of the mainstream of our understanding of the Lordship and rule of Christ and is clearly there in the *Gospels* and the *Letters* and (of course) *Revelation*. This has generated a great deal of speculation over the years about when and how it is going to happen. Apart from the dismal record of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (who have now wisely given up the idea of predicating a date) many others have also had a go. In October 1844 there was the “Great Disappointment “ when a sect, led by William Miller, generated huge interest on naming the date and much less interest when the date passed safely.

There are plenty more recent examples of speculative theories identifying the Anti Christ (*Hal Lindsey* wrote the “ *Late Great Planet earth* “ identified the creation of the European Union as the “ten horned beast rising from the sea” mentioned in *Revelation*) and many American groups see the United Nations as the “ world government “ heralding a clear sign of Christ’s imminent return. The return of the Jews to Israel is seen by many as significant in the count down to Armageddon. *Carlos Roa*, the Argentinian goalie refused a new contract in 2000 because he believed the world was going to end and he needed to prepare.

Yet none of this is new. Speculation and expectation was around when *Thessalonians* was written. Indeed there was a real sense that Christ would return and soon – to the extent that some in the church had given up their day jobs in expectation and Paul tells them to knuckle down and get on earning a living.

Yet while there are dangers of getting seduced into the speculative schemes of people there is an equal danger of complacency. Of not being prepared for when this is going to happen. Although it will come as a great surprise to every body that doesn't stop us being prepared, awake and ready.

Paul uses two images. One about birth the other about burglary. The end of history will be unannounced. Christ will return and bring an end to history as a *thief in the night*. Indeed as people are distracted by believing that peace and safety is inevitable and long lasting (the big driving force behind politics and government and insurances – but note nothing about justice on which both of these things can only be based) – the end will take them completely unawares.

The Second Coming is also inevitable (not simply the scientific expectation that the ruin and loss of the earth and all that gives worth to existence which will be an inevitable product of when the sun eventually (in hundreds of millions of years) goes super nova and swallows the earth) but as with birth pains go with birth that judgement will be a part of this as God intervenes directly in human affairs. This element of judgement is important. *Heinrich Vogel* observed “*whoever thinks he can smile at God's wrath will never praise him eternally for his grace.*”

Christ will return at the right time- but nobody knows when. The only certainty around the timing is that we cannot be certain of the timing. The real question is not when but whether you are awake or asleep, So Paul writes in v6 **“So then we should not be sleeping like the others we should be awake and sober.”**

I want us to think for a few minutes of what this sleep looks like. It is not a case of physical sleep walking or recommending sleep less nights. Nor is it just a reference to not getting well oiled and frequenting many of the UK's town centres like Reading and Cardiff which are testimony to the growing problems of public drunkenness. Indeed a local councillor in Brighton and Hove bemoaned that there are 1.300 places to buy alcohol in the town and it is so cheap that it discourages restraint.

Sleep here is used as picture language. It is a proper night time activity for those in the dark. So it is not so much staying awake in the dark. Like me when driving back from London to Dorset through the New Forest suddenly presented with a bank of trees in the headlights where the road should have been. Or with Jane's brother Simon being hit from behind by a lorry driver

asleep at the wheel. No it is rather that we are children of the light. Daytime is not for sleeping but for being alert and active.

Sleepyhead

1. Caught napping

There are plenty of teachings about what is going to happen. So forewarned should be forearmed. So really there is no excuse for not being aware and ready for the Lord's return and what we need to be doing in readiness for it when it happens. As with the *wise and foolish virgins* (or young girls) and a number of other warning oracles Jesus spells out the need to watch and being ready at any time of night or day.

This then links to how we live our daily lives. Jesus used the illustration of that of the servant left in charge who thought the day of return a long way off and began to beat and mistreat the others in his care and being exposed as a fraud and punished on the masters unexpected return. Indeed both here and elsewhere there is the danger of being excluded and of being judged but we have an assurance writes Paul that "*God did not choose us to suffer his anger but to see salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us in order that we might live through him.*" It doesn't depend all on us but by God's grace. Yet given the very clear explanations in the Bible for us to expect Jesus to come back but we are living life as if it wasn't going happen or is important is to sleep walk into danger.

So there are things that we must avoid and things that we must do.

2. Blissfully unaware

Firstly being sleep can be seen as losing focus or not being clear headed on those things of Christian life and character and the work of the Spirit. Of getting caught up and distracted with the values and mores, the fears and the hopes of those around us. To live as though we were still in the dark. It doesn't mean that others do not have hope but the basis of our hope is remarkably different to those who do not have Christ in their life.

3. Asleep on the job

It is about watching out for the creeping effects of moral or spiritual carelessness. So Paul writes to the Ephesians "*be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people but wise people.. because these are evil days . Don't be foolish then but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do.*"

This also therefore means getting a balance in life where we do not become victims to any excess (not just alcohol) but anything which befuddles our true sense of purpose and focus. Those things that consume us and our waking hours which like the effects of alcohol affect both our thinking and behaviour and undermine our sense of self control.

On the flip side Paul uses one his favourite illustrations- that of a soldier but in each case it is for slightly different purposes. Here is someone who is a wide awake sentry . Poised and ready. He has his thinking cap on, he is living appropriately to the situation (righteousness) and he has a proper awareness

and understanding of the future (hope). We have confidence not because we know the date but because of right and proper conduct in the light of what God has already done , will do and what we know the future holds.

Daylight activities

In today's world in repairing tube lines and rush jobs on motorway construction we can easily set up lighting rigs to work throughout the night. But then as now normally you work in day light. As we are "of the day" so we are able to work. Indeed it is shameful to be asleep when there is work to be done. **What is this work?** The Good News translates the word *oikodomeo* as "encourage" but it is better translated as in the NIV as "build" – as in a house. It also took on several other meanings in the New Testament for the mutual responsibility of all believers to see the growth and development of the Christian community. It links back to the writing of the prophets in seeing Israel as the "House of Israel" and therefore now helping to construct the "New Israel" under a new covenant. Of the importance of enabling each member to grow in faith hope and love.

We see this in various form as in growing, developing and establishing the work of God as in *Matthew 7* where Jesus says "*anyone who hears these words of mine (Jesus) and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock.*" The same verb is present in Acts which the GNB bible translates "*through the help of the Holy Spirit it (the church) was strengthened and grew in numbers (Acts 9:31)* - following the conversion of Saul and the reduction (for a time) of persecution that followed.

Linked , however, to this Paul often uses it in the sense of edification- a growth in spiritual and moral improvement that as a community (and as individuals) we are being built into a fit temple of the Holy Spirit So in *1 Cor 3* "*You are also God's building... Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you.*"

Linked to this is a building project that many different people are engaged with but all building on the same foundation of Jesus. It is a reminder that a Christian is not primarily to build himself/herself up but builds up other Christians a part of the work of the church. So all can grow together and at the same time grow as an individual. We each know the grace of God and it is as we use it for the benefit of others that as we give it and we receive it from others then real growth can take place.

So we gather these things together

Christ is returning. We need to be wakeful but not fretful of that fact. We do need to respect, however, what Jesus is expecting of those who belong to him. That there will be an assessment. Our hope is based on the new future of a new heaven and earth and that although much of what people currently rely on to give them meaning and purpose will disappear it does not mean it is meaningless but rather that we are not to invest it with too much meaning

as it will pass away. It is wiser to focus on what is to be rather than what will go. That does not mean that there is not work for us to do in this life as we are in the day light and can see clearly with better focus and purpose on what needs to be done in the full light of day. Building can only be done jointly and together to encourage one another and help one another. We are already doing it (like the Thessalonians) but that's not to say we cannot do more and do it better.

Questions

How can we keep a proper balance between concentrating on the Second Coming (Parousia) too much (scaremongering) and not enough (complacency)?

What are things that make us sleepy and confused as Christians, and how can we cure them?

Group work:

Make a list of ways you can encourage other Christians. Decide how you will put a policy of encouragement into practice.