

**SERMON: 2 December 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“THE HOPE IN GOD’S COMING”**

**(1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 and Luke 21:25-36)**

I read an article this week by the retired surgeon Henry Marsh, about the human heart, in which he quoted the cardiologist Bernard Lown who spoke of many of his patients seemingly dying from heart failure but who were revived by being given hope. Lown openly admitted to lying to patients as a therapeutic strategy, because he argues that hope is a very powerful drug.

If I was unwell and had to see a doctor, I’m not sure that it would help my healing to know that my doctor wasn’t telling me the truth. But I do think I’d feel better if I was told I was going to get better. That would be something to hope for.

The old proverb says hope deferred makes the heart sick, so it looks like there is a link between hope and the heart.

When the Bible speaks of hope, and it does so around 180 times, it’s usually in connection with hoping for the Lord, for example, Psalm 33 says,

We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.

Or Psalm 119, You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.

Or Isaiah 40, those who hope in the Lord will have their strength renewed.

The Bible seems to make it quite clear that the birth of Jesus 2,000 years ago, First Coming of Christ was the fulfilment of the hope for the Messiah, the redeemer and deliverer of God’s people. And that there will be a Second Coming, for which people are to look forward to with hopeful expectation.

The hope of Christ’s returning is the hope for the expansion to fulfilment of God’s kingdom.

So what does this mean for us?

We're not to wait idly by until Christ returns. Instead, we're called co-workers with Christ to bring the kingdom to fulfilment. We're co-workers because the Risen Christ is still here working, through his Spirit, in the lives of his co-workers.

But having tasted a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven, it's no surprise then that we're hungry for Christ's kingdom rule to extend to all of creation. So, in this way, we long for Christ to come in every being; into all of Creation; into every person made in the image of God, male and female; into every person, who has been endowed with the Seed of Life, with the potential to grow into Christ-likeness.

This longing that we all have in the deep places of our souls, is what the Bible calls hope. A hope for things to be better. And a hope for things to be put right.

According to the Bible, hope doesn't exist in isolation. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul, Timothy and Silas commend the Thessalonians for putting their faith into practise as they wait on the coming of Christ. In other words, as they wait in hope, they exercise faith in practical acts of service.

Advent is the time of the year when we think about waiting. But it's not an idle waiting. It always includes putting faith into practise; and to do so in love, knowing we are loved by the God who is love.

The letter (4:10) tells us that the Thessalonians had become known throughout Macedonia for they love! What a great thing to be known for. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be known for our love, whilst we wait in hope? Imagine the impact a church might make on its community or an individual in her street or in his own family or workplace.

Paul, Silas and Timothy knew the importance of hope and faith and love. They could see how these three elements had to run together, As Paul says in first Corinthians, these three remain, faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love. They encourage the Thessalonians to increase in love to the point where their love would overflow.

"may the Lord increase your love until it overflows toward one another and for all people, just as our love overflows toward you. Then your hearts will be

strengthened in holiness so that you may be flawless and pure before *the face of our God and Father at the appearing of our Lord Jesus*".

This is how these followers of Jesus were to live the rest of their days, and its how we're invited to live too, as we wait in hope, and as we put faith into practise in the overflow of love. So we look for and pray for opportunities to show kindness, and get involved with acts of service in our community.

But we also need to recognise that we need to keep our personal faith alive, so that we will be continually given the strength to persevere and the wisdom to know where and when and how to act.

Jesus himself tells his friends in Luke 21, to keep constant watch, to not let their hearts grow cold but guard their hearts and watch their souls, and pray for the courage and grace to prevail over the worries and concerns of this life.

Eugene Peterson in the Message puts it like this, don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. That's an interesting translation to read this near Christmas!

The first coming of Christ brought real hope into people's lives. It transformed their perspective on life and death. It gave them something to look forward to in the coming again of Christ, which they thought would happen soon.

The letter to the Thessalonians is written only some 20 years after Jesus died and rose again but they were still expecting his return soon. Jesus himself had said, 'Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.'

As time has gone by, people have realised that such things might not happen in their lifetime but that their life times mattered in the coming of the kingdom.

Because God's way of working was to have the Risen Christ intimately at work in the lives of his followers, and in this way he is still coming into people's lives today, and on a daily basis, and will continue to do so until the end of time.

Earlier in the service, we heard a bit about the old prophetess, Anna, in the Temple at the time when Jesus was born. She had made herself ready to point to Jesus the Messiah. How? By worshipping God.

In 84 years she would have seen good times and bad, yet she kept on, she kept hope alive, she tended the light inside, she guarded her heart and soul. May we be like her, and be known for our faith, our hope and our love. For there is always hope in God's coming.