

The Night is Far Gone

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[0 : 00] I'm not sure whether it was the preacher or the congregation in the last service. It's an irony that I should be preaching on a passage that says, Wake from sleep and people are so sleepy.

But I want you to not be sleepy for this service. And so I'd like you to have this page 95 open for the end of the sermon. And I wanted to point out to you that we began last week, this season of Advent, from page 94 through to 320 odd, are the collects, epistles and gospels for the church year.

In 1549, these were made, the readings and the prayers that Anglicans would pray and read throughout the church year. And since then, Anglican churches and Christians throughout the world have been praying these prayers and reading these readings.

And I was going to begin last week with the Romans 13 reading, but was very rudely interrupted by Bishop Harvey being here. I'm just, I'm kidding. I need you to give, cut me some slack.

It was a great joy to have him here with us. And I want to go back and look at this reading, Romans 13, and look at the readings through the season of Advent, because they all circle around a transformation which concerns all of us.

[1 : 27] So if you put the prayer book open aside and take up your Bible, we'll turn to Romans 13 on page 153. Romans chapter 13, verses 8 to 14 on page 153.

It's about a great transformation. And I remind you, in verse 11, we read these words. The Apostle Paul says, Besides this, you know what hour it is.

It is full time for you to now wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone.

The day is at hand. The great transformation is salvation. The things that Jesus achieved by coming, entering our world, by living for us, dying for us, and rising from the dead, is pictured now as a great shining reality that is bursting upon us like the dawn, moving towards us as we move towards it, shining its rays into our hearts, filling our hearts with hope and light and life.

And every step we take today and every step we take in our lives carries us closer to that day and everything that belongs to the darkness will be swept away. Everything that belongs to this world will be swept away.

[2 : 59] And all who belong to Jesus Christ will receive full salvation. We will be made entire and whole and complete and we will see him face to face where faith will be turned into sight.

This is the big transformation. This is what this season is all about. The world that hates Jesus Christ will one day bow and call him Lord.

And on that day the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever. The world in which you and I live is covered in thick darkness, says the Bible.

Because by itself, by ourselves, we cannot see this light and that thick darkness will be with us until the day he comes. But we are moving closer to this great transformation when Jesus will be revealed with all his glory and majesty and dominion and brilliance.

And it is so close, Paul says, the night is almost over. It's far gone. The day is at hand. The first lights of dawn are shining over the horizon and they are being received into our hearts.

[4 : 14] Now how can the Apostle say this? And the answer is because the great turning point has already arrived. If you would keep your finger in Romans 13 and turn back to Luke chapter 1 for just a moment.

I want you to see this. This is not an excuse to just keep you awake. Turn back to chapter 1 in Luke, which is on page 55. These are very familiar words for us at Christmastime, where the father of John the Baptist prophesies under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 76 he says about John the Baptist, You, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

Where does that come from? Through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The day that is dawning, the sun that is rising, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. Or as the prophet Malachi calls him, the sun of righteousness, who will rise with healing in his wings.

[5 : 34] Or as Jesus calls himself, in the very last chapter of the Bible, I am the bright morning star. What these words mean is this, that the world in which you and I live is moving swiftly and urgently towards the coming of Jesus Christ.

And we participate in him and in his coming through faith. And although we are still surrounded by darkness, the dawn has begun and it changes everything. He says, you know what time it is.

You know it's time to wake up. Don't just lie there. Get out of bed. And I think for Christians, of course this means that we are to live in this world longing for the next.

The Christian life is a life that leans forward, longing for the day. That's where the centre of our and our affections are. In the next world. In the day of salvation that's now dawning.

And I think we've got this completely the wrong way round. We're so immersed in this world and our hearts and our prayers and our dreams are so caught up in this dark world. We live as though this is the real place.

[6 : 42] This is the eternal home. And that the coming of Jesus is a kind of distraction from the main game. And we just look at our priorities and where we spend our time and our money.

We build ourselves so that we're happier in the dark and we don't turn our faces to welcome the coming of Jesus. Let me put it to you this way. It's all a matter of horizons. See, what if this world is not followed by heaven and hell?

What if the day of salvation is not coming? It means that this life is all that there is, doesn't it? And if this life is all that there is, there's no reason why I should not live my 80 years for myself and try and build all the pleasure and power and prestige and portfolio I possibly could.

I mean, if this world is all that there is, I have a right to be happy. And I will do all that I can to satisfy myself and all my choices, big ones and little ones, will be controlled by this.

I want to get what I want. I'm going to be happy. And God's word comes to us and says, this 80 years or so that you live on this earth is followed by an eternity.

[7 : 54] And that eternity of light is now pressing itself into our lives now as Christ comes. And that your life and my life is part of a far greater reality.

And that you and I are not defined, we are not who we are because of who we are here. But because we're moving to meet the Lord Jesus Christ.

The meaning of our lives, in a sense, comes from his coming and from who he is. And the world, it's very urgent in the Greek, the world stands on the brink of falling into this light.

And any moment he will come in the full light of his glory. That's the great transformation, the passage wants to give us. But one of the lovely things that you find about all these passages throughout Advent is that they are not in the least sentimental.

They're very practical. And so with that transformation in mind, the apostle now spells out two very practical consequences. The first has to do with our relation to Jesus himself.

[8 : 56] Look back down at verse 12, please. The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.

Very obvious. If the night is far gone, if the day is at hand, and if we belong to the light that's dawning, Christ is coming and bringing his salvation, we ought to live as though that's true.

We ought to cast off all those behaviours that belong to this darkness and put on those things which belong to the day. Let me try and give you an illustration. It's a little bit like moving countries.

Let's just imagine that you lived in a very warm country, somewhere like Australia. Let's just pretend. And you were going to move to a very cold country.

Let's just imagine Canada. And it was drawing very close. It was within days or hours. The whole way that you live is different. For a start, if you know you're going to move, you trim down, don't you?

[10:03] You don't collect as many possessions because you know that the situation in which you're in is not permanent. You begin to live for the new situation. And there are a whole heap of things that you would leave behind in Australia.

We left behind our appliances and we left them and scattered them amongst our friends. And each time we visit back home in Australia, I discover another appliance that's completely broken down. Do you know I left my surfboard at home in Australia? In fact, I left all my surfing accoutrements, but I couldn't bring myself to part with my wetsuit.

There's, I don't know why, an emotional attachment to my wetsuit. I brought my wetsuit with me to Canada and it's in the basement. Do you know how many times I've used it since I've been here? Twice.

And both times I've baptised someone in very cold water. I'll tell you about that another day. Just imagine if you're moving from Canada to the Bahamas.

[11:08] You know, all the skis and the snowshoes and the snow boots and the winter tyres, they all suddenly become less important, don't they, in the light of the new situation. What are the works of darkness that we're to cast off?

Verse 13. Let's conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, which means partying, kind of all night raving and drinking as much as you can, not in debauchery and licentiousness, which is sexual promiscuity, or in quarrelling and jealousy, which is much more socially acceptable.

And Paul says, these things are all marks of darkness. If you live like that, you're living with your eyes closed. That's how you live if Christ is not coming.

They're the opposite of salvation. They all reflect the darkness of the heart and it's interesting that Paul should write them because the Roman Christians, these were real temptations for the Roman Christians. That's why he says them.

But because Christ is coming, he says, we are to put off, cast off these works of darkness and put on the armour of light. It's a great picture. The armour of light is how we are outwardly.

[12:19] And the armour of light, the light in our armour, reflects the coming of Jesus Christ. In other words, we are to reflect what Jesus is like to other people. Same thing in verse 14.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Make no provision to gratify the desires of the flesh. Don't make a plan. Don't plan out your future so that you will gratify your flesh, he says, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not do good things, which they'll come as a consequence. But put on the Lord Jesus. Put on him. Live his life outward. Abide in him and do the things that he would do.

Deliberately, consciously. It's a command to us. This is what we do. Reflect his priorities. Show what Jesus is like to other people. It's very concrete, isn't it? It's a very practical consequence from this great transformation.

Fashion your life, says the Apostle Paul, so that you reflect the priorities and actions of Jesus.

That's the first consequence of Jesus coming. And the second, the second consequence has to do with our relation with others.

[13:26] Back to verse 8. Owe no one anything, it's a good word for us in this Christmas season, except to love one another. For he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law.

Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ is not just something we do in private. It profoundly affects how we act towards our neighbours. Someone who puts on the Lord Jesus Christ will be a kinder, more gracious, more generous, loving neighbour.

And when we love our neighbour, Paul says, we fulfil the law. You see verse 9. You know, this is what the law is. You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.

All the commandments they're summed up in this one sentence, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. See, what the law does is it sets a boundary, a line, a marker, a limit.

It tries to restrain our flesh and our selfishness to stop the spread of darkness. And the way law works is it sets limits. It draws the line and says, you go across that line, that's sin.

[14:34] That's why the commandments are in the negative, you shall not. But love works in completely the opposite way. It doesn't look at the boundary line and says, how far can I go?

How much can I get away with before I cross the line? It's not motivated by what's good for me, it's motivated by what will please Jesus Christ, what will put on Jesus Christ for my neighbour and for

the other person.

And it keeps crossing lines. It crosses boundaries. It tries to do what is good and what is kind and what is lovely and what is even beautiful for the other person.

The law tries to restrain and constrain us within boundaries and love does the opposite. It's a creative energy and it flows out to other people.

And do you know where it comes from? It comes from the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is coming and the day is nearly here. Do you know, I heard this last wonderful story, terrible story, of the Christians in the Sudan.

[15:35] You know how in the south of the Sudan there is a Muslim insurgency that's been there for a number of years, the Janjaweed. And they have systematically tortured and killed and enslaved Christians in the Darfur.

And most of the Christian towns and villages have been burnt to the ground and the Christians have been driven out into the bush and into the hills and into the caves around about. That was completely years ago.

What has happened is that the Muslim insurgents have turned on one another and now the Arab Muslims from the north have turned on the black Muslims in the south and have begun to enslave and torture and persecute them.

And as the black Muslims who had killed and persecuted the Christians began to flee into the bush and into the hills, the Christians had a wonderful opportunity to kill their former persecutors.

But what they have done is the opposite. Even though some of them are starving to death, they have cared for these former persecutors. They have taken them in, bound up their wounds, clothed them and shared their food.

[16:47] This is happening today as we meet here. That's what it means to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. It means you have a debt to your neighbour and your debt and my debt to our neighbours like our brothers and sisters in Sudan is to love that other person.

The terrible thing about your neighbour is that you just can't choose him or her. It's the person who God gives you and each of us today are going to have that opportunity to exercise that debt of love. It's wonderful. There's nothing sentimental about this year. The Apostle's not speaking about having a good emotion, having good will. He's saying we are to be like Jesus.

We are to learn to love like Jesus. And it's very counter cultural that Jesus' love pushes him in very strange directions. He eats with people who will never be popular.

He confronts the religious authorities which will never be popular. He's contemptuous of sinful human boundaries. He keeps expanding his love out, but it's not just an unrealistic idealism.

[17:56] He has a very practical purpose in mind with his love, and it is to bring salvation, to do what he can for the other person for their spiritual good, ultimately for their salvation. Brilliant illustration in the life of Zacchaeus.

Do you remember why Jesus went into Zacchaeus' house? He didn't go in to show what a big person he was, Jesus, and what a great statement he made that he could lower himself to eat with this tax collector.

He doesn't do it so that we should try and find those people who are undeserving of the great good of our company. No, Jesus says in Zacchaeus' house, I have come to seek and save the lost.

And when Zacchaeus turns in repentance towards God, Jesus says, today salvation has come to this house. Jesus is not just building bridges, he's not just trying to set up a vague atmosphere of positive feeling, he's bringing salvation, that's what he means by love.

If you'd ask Zacchaeus' neighbours what Zacchaeus' real problem was, you'd get the answer, it's greed. Through his love, Jesus shows the problem was that he did not know what salvation was.

[19:15] we've got to get through the sentimentalism of this season, we've got to see that the transformation that is coming in the Lord Jesus Christ means that we are to put on the armour of light and we are to love as he loved, we are to do what is spiritually beneficial for our neighbour even if it means inconveniencing ourselves.

And I think we need to, just as we finish, I want to think this through with you for just a moment, the constant pressure from our culture is to say this, I live for the now. It's an insidious pressure.

I want to live as though salvation is not close, that Christ is not coming. But just think this through with me for a moment. If Christ is not coming, we ought to live for the darkness, should we not?

We ought to do anything and everything that we can to gratify our own desires. We ought to carefully plan our lives so that we can have all the lusts of our flesh satisfied.

Debauchery and sexual license, if that's what you want, partying and drinking as hard as you can, as often as you can, for as long as you can, if that is what you want, or indulging your jealousies and your fighting and your greed.

[20 : 32] Think about this even more. If Christ is not coming, you owe your neighbour nothing. There is no reason to owe a debt of love.

There is no reason to act graciously to another person if Christ is not coming, except as a subtle, cynical, calculating, pragmatic way to manipulate them to love you.

If there is no salvation coming, there is no reason to treat anyone else as anything but an instrument for your own satisfaction. and acting lovingly may well be the way to get you to do for me what I want you to do, but it is not really love.

But you see, Christ has been raised from the dead. It is now full time to wake from sleep. We cannot live just for the now. We must live now in the light of the day that is coming.

Our lives now don't make any sense apart from the coming of Jesus Christ. But this moment of darkness in which we live is being slowly overwhelmed by the light that is coming in Christ.

[21 : 39] And his resurrection shows us what the future is. And the rays of that light are now shining on our hearts and in our faces and if you lift up your heads you will see them and feel them even today.

And the wonderful and practical command for us is don't just stand by as passive onlookers and put your head back under the blanket it. In how we responded and how we lived we are invited to help bring the light of salvation into this dark place.

To cast off the works of darkness, to put on the armour of light means to live our lives to please him, to reflect him to others and it means to push back the darkness and to build that light and to reflect the salvation that's coming until he comes with all his glorious angels and takes us to be with him.

So let's pray that prayer that's on page 95 together, the collect for the first Sunday in Advent. Let's make this the way in which we begin our prayers together.

Together. Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness. Put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility, that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through him who liveth and reigneth, the holy spirit, now and ever.

[23 : 28] Amen. Amen.