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Dear Friends,

*The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...
so let us keep awake ... (1 Thess 5)*

Over the past, nearly 60 years, I've had a number of close calls and know I am not alone in this. As a Girl Guide rushing over the main road to get to the chip shop I was knocked over by a Ford Cortina. Back then I may have been shaken up but thinking, like most youngsters, that this was simply a close encounter. I got up, shook myself off, and downed my salty potatoes.

There were some serious incidents in my teenage years, but not for one moment did they make me think that working with racehorses could be life threatening. Concussion, cracked ribs and even a long stay in hospital lying flat on my back for weeks on end with a kidney haemorrhage failed to convince me of my own mortality. And then there was the incident in Miami when viral meningitis stole the future of countless young people. In my plastic isolation bubble tent on life support with meningitis, hepatitis and glandular fever I was blissfully unaware that my parents were not even permitted to touch me.

My own vulnerabilities did not really sink in when several bouts of bilateral pneumonia and stays in hospital stalked my early years as a mother. It took until 2014 for the truth to dawn "the day of the Lord" could come at any time. Whilst I knew my health was deteriorating, foolishly imagining I was indispensable and barely able to stand, I put on my professional face and conducted a funeral. I was blue-lighted into hospital when I collapsed a few hours later. And there I stayed for weeks on end, dripped and tubed and drifting in and out of consciousness whilst my family watched and waited. Finally, after two weeks convalescing in Burrswood, I realised that had it not been for the vocation, skill, dedication, and compassion of countless medics The Old Man's Friend (pneumonia) would have claimed me.

"Now" says Paul, "*concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters you do not need to have anything written to you*". In other words you know when to plant and when to sow, when to reap and harvest. You know when to take your umbrella and when to take your sunglasses. "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night". You know, Paul is saying, that you need to get yourself ready. There's no time; don't put off life because one day you will be caught unawares.

"*You beloved*" says Paul, "*are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief*". Paul is reminding the early church in Thessaloniki to prepare themselves for they are already "children of light" and should not to be like the drunkards who are so lured by the riches and cares of the world that, despite knowing Christ Jesus as their Lord, they fail to attend to the important things in the here and now. Paul invites the church to put on "*the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation*" ...and now here is the game changer "*for God has destined us not for wrath but ... salvation through our Lord..*"

We are not invincible; we are here for a short time, aliens passing through a foreign land. So how shall we live? Matthew's Jesus puts it like thisa man going on a journey entrusts his slaves with his property and gives them responsibilities according to their ability (in looking after his finances). The man going on a journey is clearly a rich aristocrat with much property leaving his trusted servants to run his affairs. It was very normal in the Greco-Roman world for slaves to occupy responsible positions. The master entrusts them with his enormous wealth giving one slave five talents, another two talents and another just one talent (one talent could keep a person alive for some 15 years or so). This arrangement is a kind of investment by the master. So he expects to find a decent return on his capital and naturally asks each slave to report back on his return.



So far in London ten bouquet have been left to cheer up commuters

The first two slaves are praised for doubling the capital but the last man, being scared and believing that his lord and master was interested only in gain and would treat him harshly, buried his talent in the ground. Not surprisingly his master tells him if that is really what he believed then why did he not invest the funds so that there would have been interest on his return? Is the theologian who suggests that this is a story about an absentee landlord trying to bleed the land dry correct? I doubt it personally, although rich individuals who oppressed others were critiqued by Jesus. No, the third slave was a fool, not because he played safe and buried the money but because he thought his master was judgmental and unforgiving. Is that what we believe about our Lord? Finally, we hear the confusing and unpalatable ending. Matthew's Jesus who narrates the story has the lazy servant thrown into outer darkness. We, along with those first listeners, are moved from our everyday world of profit and loss into the imagery of heaven and hell. The way we live affects our eternal destiny. Eternal life, according to Jesus, begins here and now.

Matthew's "Parable of the talents" compares the business of life in the service of God to the business of investments. We all have "talents" to use in God's service but do we make a decent return for our investor? Talents hoarded may just as well be thrown or given away. God is generous and has given us life, faith, gifts and possessions to spend and share that they might be a blessing, not just to ourselves, but to others. The foolish servant should have taken a risk o, as Matthew also puts it, "*those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it*". It is for this reason that Paul writes to the early church urging them to keep alert just in case the thief should come in the night.

Next Sunday as we celebrate Christ the King and meet the sheep and the goats in the story that follows the Parable of the Talents. Matthew's Jesus will remind us that acts of kindness are not simply the preserve of Christ's followers. In London a woman going through hard times herself launched the Kindness Project on Instagram leaving bunches of flowers with caring notes in random places for people to find and enjoy - her generous actions have inspired many others around the UK to do the same. What could we do for others and for our Master this week?



*"let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake....
encourage one another and build up each other as indeed you are doing"*

With love

Vicki