

3RD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: CORINTHIANS 7:29-31

"I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short..."

REFLECT:

Last week I picked up a pamphlet someone had left on a bench in the hospital. Filling the front cover in large, bold print were the words "Very soon millions of people will suddenly disappear!" and in small print beneath, the words "(if the Rapture has already taken place, please turn over)". Of course, intrigued, I turned over, to find an alternative 'front' cover with the large title "Why have millions of people suddenly disappeared?" The producers of this tract really had planned for all eventualities.

The reading I've chosen from the lectionary's offerings this week is a short one and a bit of an odd one. Paul was writing from a belief that Jesus' return was imminent. 1900 or so years

later, the Christians who still hold this view are probably in a minority. Does that mean these words from Paul are destined for the recycling bin too? Or might they still have something important to say to us?

I think perhaps they do have something to say. Something about priorities, about hope, about an awareness of what's impermanent and what's of ultimate importance.

Such awareness gives a sense of both freedom and urgency. In my chaplaincy role I have the very great privilege of witnessing the way those who have received a terminal diagnosis, who know (and courageously accept) that their time is short, do a kind of inventory of what does, and doesn't matter. "That doesn't matter now. This is what's important. This how I want to use the time and energy that, in their scarcity, have become such precious resources."

The events we find ourselves living through now might call forth a similar reevaluation of priorities. We are all shaken by loss, by a new awareness of our vulnerability, by a sudden disappearance of the routines that structured our lives and of so much that we took for granted before this pandemic took hold.

I don't for a moment think that Paul condemns marriage, or mourning, or rejoicing, or buying, or having dealings with the world. But I think his words call us to lift up our eyes. To live with urgency, clarity and freedom. As those who have been shaken awake to the preciousness and impermanence of life. As those who have their eyes on eternity and their hope in God.

CONNECT:

Pause and take inventory. It can be helpful to name our losses. To recognise and give space to grief. Consider also, what has this pandemic revealed? Are there things that have fallen away that won't be missed? Are there things that are more valuable than we ever realised?

PRAY:

- For all who have been shaken awake to the fragility of life; whether by illness, death, disaster or economic uncertainty
- For the staff in our hospitals, facing danger every day and working under intense and growing pressure.
- That we will be bearers and bringers of hope.

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:

www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.