

**‘Encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing’**

**1 Thessalonians 5.11**



‘Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters,’ says the Apostle, ‘you do not need to have anything written to you’ (1 Thessalonians 5.1). In the face of the traumas which inflict the whole creation – ‘wars and rumours of wars’, ‘famines and earthquakes’ (as they are described in Matthew 24.6-8) – Jesus says to his friends, ‘see that you are not alarmed’: these are the ‘birth pangs’, a testing of our hearts and of our wills to clear the ground on which the Kingdom of God can then be built. These themes will become a focus of the readings which are given to us during Advent, when we shall hear the cry of one who is in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40.3; Mark 1.2-4); but they are already here in the readings on the final Sundays of the year as we look at the whole creation as it is held in the gaze of God, bracing itself for judgement, but awaiting its longed-for renewal.

It may well be that we feel ready for *renewal*; but there is a judgement too – a holding to account, a *reckoning* before the things which are distorted can be put right. It is *this* which Jesus encourages us not to fear; it is about this that the Apostle says he has *no need* to write, precisely because there is no need for fear. As it says elsewhere: ‘*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear*’ (1 John 4.18) – and we are the people whose hope is built on the Love of God; we are the people who are called to *love one another*, the sign which will show that we are Jesus’ disciples, and even more than that, his *friends* (John 15.12-17; John 13.34-35). These texts

combine with each other as a meditation on the quality of love among the friends of Christ which strengthens us all in the face of worry or threat or distress, a love which is stronger and more resilient than anything else in the world. This is why we *keep faith*, why *hope remains strong*, come what may. Our faith and our hope can be resilient because, as the Apostle puts it somewhere else, they are '*rooted and grounded in love*' (Ephesians 3.17); it is why faith and hope and love are the basis of all meaningful Christian life in the first place (1 Corinthians 13.13).

We can describe the traumas and sources of anxiety and distress as a kind of *darkness*, or what the Psalmist calls the '*valley of the shadow of death*' (Psalm 23.4) before he goes on to say that '*I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me*'. In the same way, the Apostle continues: '*But you, beloved, are not in the darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day*' (1 Thessalonians 5.4-5). As we begin to prepare for Christmas we shall hear again and again the words of the prophets and of the angels, the messengers of God: '*do not be afraid*' (Luke 1.13, 30, 2.10; Matthew 1.20); we shall hear of the *light* which '*shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*' (John 1.5). So let us *notice* this light which we have been nurturing all year in the quiet attentiveness of our hearts, which is what the Quakers call the *Inner Light*, our assurance of the Presence of God always with us, '*Emmanuel*' (Isaiah 7.14; Matthew 1.23); let us *cherish* it.

The Scriptures would not say these things so consistently and repeatedly if there were not any darkness, or if there were not any sources of anxiety and fear. We, too, know these things to be part of our experience of reality. But they speak again, and the more consistently and repeatedly both of *love* and of *light* as the sources of comfort and inspiration and hope in the face of everything else. They describe love and light – the attributes of God – as a reality which is deeper, stronger still. The Song of Songs puts it this way: '*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it*' (Song 8.7); it continues with a spectacular focus of the intention and of the will towards all the sources of darkness and anxiety and fear, a point of view which is chosen and determined: '*If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned*'. Let the light which enlightens our hearts and our minds through this time be like *that*, rooted and grounded in the Love of God, robust, confident, undimmed, and for which we will swap nothing, which we will hold tight and never let go.