**A God-incidence to ponder**

On Tuesday 5 Sep 2023 a very unusual event happened. It was Week 2 in Morning Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, and the scripture reading was 1 Thess 5:4-5. In the lectionary for Mass that day it was Week 22 of Year 1 and the first reading was 1 Thess 5:1-6,9-11.

Given that this event can only happen once every 2 years at maximum, and that it can only happen if there isn’t a major feast day on the day between late August and mid-September that this particular Tuesday of Week 22 Year 1 could fall upon – it could easily have been 4 years or much longer since the last time both readings matched. There are at least 4 major feast days between late August and mid-September.

On Saturday 2 Sep 2023 a seminarian friend was discussing 1 Thess 5:4-5 because he was seeking ideas for preaching on those verses.

I think you could call that a Divine Set-up for looking more closely at 1 Thess 5:1-11. After looking at the cross references provided by a study bible, and reviewing the transliterated Greek via the BibleHub website, deeper understanding of this passage of Scripture occurred.

At the end I had a new question, ‘How do we build each other up in faith, hope, and agape love?’

Bear with me and I will show you how I reached that new question. It will be a long journey. It starts with reading the text of 1 Thess 5:1-11 in full, then looking at the cross references, and then looking at those places where our English translation doesn’t capture the original Greek well enough.

According to the Jerusalem Bible translation, 1 Thess 5:1-11 goes like this:

1. You will not be expecting us to write anything to you, brothers, about ‘times and seasons’,
2. since you know very well that the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night.
3. It is when people are saying, ‘How quiet and peaceful it is’ that the worst suddenly happens, as suddenly as labour pains come on a pregnant woman; and there will be no way for anybody to evade it.
4. But it is not as if you live in the dark, my brothers, for that Day to overtake you like a thief.
5. No, you are all sons of light and sons of the day: we do not belong to the night or to the darkness,
6. so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, but stay wide awake and sober.
7. Night is the time for sleepers to sleep and drunkards to be drunk,
8. but we belong to the day and we should be sober; let us put on faith and love for a breastplate, and the hope of salvation for a helmet.
9. God never meant us to experience the Retribution, but to win salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,
10. who died for us so that, alive or dead, we should still live united to Him.
11. So give encouragement to each other, and keep strengthening one another, as you do already.

Remember that St Paul was a learned Pharisee, he knew the Old Testament very well, and he also had access to the source material that would in time be recognised by us as the four Gospels. This means that St Paul used terms deliberately to allude to various scripture references, and that we cannot truly understand St Paul’s meaning unless we understand the cross references.

**Times and seasons**

Daniel 2:21 May the name of God be blessed for ever and ever, since wisdom and power are His alone. His, to control the procession of times and seasons, to make and unmake kings, to confer wisdom on the wise, and knowledge to those with wit to discern,

Acts 1:7-8 Jesus replied, ‘It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has decided by His own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be My witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 24:36 But as for that day and hour, nobody knows it, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, no one but the Father only.

The literal Greek for 1 Thess 5:1 ‘times and seasons’ is:

Times (chronōn) A space of time or interval; by extension, an individual opportunity; by implication, delay.

Seasons, (kairōn) Fitting season, season, opportunity, occasion, time. Of uncertain affinity; an occasion, i.e. Set or proper time.

As an example, consider Galatians 4:4 When the appointed time came (or the fullness of time) came, God sent His Son, born of a woman. ‘Time’ here is Chronou, and the sense is that a period of Chonou had to elapse before a Kairos time, the incarnation of Jesus, could begin.

**Like a thief**

Matthew 24:44 Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

2 Peter 3:10 The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then with a roar the sky will vanish, the elements will catch fire and fall apart, the earth and all it contains will be burnt up.

Revelation 3:3 and yet do you remember how eager you were when you first heard the message? Hold on to that. Repent. If you do not wake up, I shall come to you like a thief, without telling you at what hour to expect Me.

**Labour pains**

Jeremiah 6:14-15 They dress My people’s wound without concern: ‘Peace! Peace!’ they say, but there is no peace. They should be ashamed of their abominable deeds. But not they! They feel no shame, they have forgotten how to blush. And so as others fall, they too shall fall; and they shall be thrown down when I come to deal with them – says the Lord God.

Jeremiah 4:31-5:1 Yes, I hear screams like those of a woman in labour, anguish like that of a woman giving birth to her first child; they are the screams of the daughter of Zion, gasping, hands outstretched, ‘Ah, I despair! I am fainting away with murderers surrounding me.’ ‘Rove to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look, now, and learn, search her squares; if you can find a man, one man who does what is right and seeks the truth, then I will pardon her, says the Lord God.’

(Ed. Jeremiah was a prophet sent to invite the people of Israel to repent, and to warn them that if they did not repent, then God’s judgement would come. It resulted in the deportations to Babylon for 70 years.)

Matthew 24:8-14 All this is only the beginning of the birthpangs. Then they will hand you over to be tortured and put to death; and you will be hated by all the nations on account of My name. And then many will fall away; men will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise; and they will deceive many, and with the increase of lawlessness, love in most men will grow cold; but the man who stands firm to the end will be saved. This Good News of the Kingdom will be proclaimed to the whole world as a witness to all the nations. And then the end will come.

**No way to evade it**

Luke 21:34-36 Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap. For it will come down on every living man on the face of the earth. Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.

**Light and darkness**

Ephesians 5:6-9 Do not let anyone deceive you with empty arguments: it is for loose living that God’s anger comes down on those who rebel against Him. Make sure that you are not included with them. You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth.

**Stay awake**

Matthew 24:42-43 So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be quite sure of this that if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house.

Romans 13:11-14 Besides, you know ‘the time’ has come: you must wake up now: our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were converted. The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon – let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light. Let us live decently as people do in the daytime: no drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness, and no wrangling or jealousy. Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ; forget about satisfying your bodies with all their cravings.

(Ed. The word used for ‘time’ here is kairos, an appointed time by God.)

**…..and sober**

1 Peter 1:13-14 Free your minds, then, of encumbrances; control them, and put your trust in nothing but the grace that will be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. Do not behave in the way that you liked to before you learnt the truth; make a habit of obedience.

1 Peter 4:7 Everything will soon come to an end, so, to pray better, keep a calm and sober mind.

1 Peter 5:8-9 Be calm but vigilant, because your enemy the devil is prowling round like a roaring lion, looking for someone to eat. Stand up to him, strong in faith and in the knowledge that your brothers all over the world are suffering the same things.

**Put on armour**

Ephesians 6:11 Put God’s armour on so as to be able to resist the devil’s tactics.

Isaiah 59:15-18 Sincerity is missing and he who avoids evil is robbed. The Lord God has seen this, and is indignant that there is no justice to be seen. He saw that there was no one and wondered there was no one to intervene. So He made His own arm His mainstay, His own integrity His support. He put integrity on like a breastplate, and on His head the helmet of salvation. He put vengeance on like a cloak. To each He will pay His due, wrath to His enemies, reprisals on His foes.

**Faith, hope and love**

1 Thessalonians 1:3 We constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:13 In short, there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love.

**Retribution**

1 Thessalonians 1:10 You are now waiting for Jesus, His Son, whom He raised from the dead, to come from heaven to save us from the retribution (or wrath) which is coming.

**Strengthen each other**

1 Thessalonians 4:14-15 Be at peace among yourselves. And this is what we ask you to do, brothers: warn the idlers, give courage to those who are apprehensive, care for the weak and be patient with everyone.

Ephesians 2:20-21 You are part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations, and Christ Jesus Himself for its main cornerstone. As every structure is aligned on Him, all grow into one holy temple in the Lord.

If you now go back and re-read 1 Thess 5:1-11, your understanding of it should have changed significantly.

**It is time now to look more carefully at the Greek transliteration.**

What we have as ‘How calm and peaceful it is’, uses peace with a connotation of prosperity and security with connotations of safety, reliability, firmness – what we might call stability.

What we have as ‘live in the dark’ uses not in darkness with connotations of both physical and moral darkness, as well as obscurity, and may refer to being under the sway of the rulers of darkness mentioned in Ephesians 6:12.

What we have as ‘the worst suddenly happens’ uses destruction with connotations of ruin, doom, death and punishment.

What we have as ‘Retribution’ uses wrath with connotations of punishment and violent justifiable passion and abhorrence.

What we have as ‘alive or dead’ uses awake with connotations of being watchful and alert and uses asleep with connotations of sleeping or falling asleep.

To give encouragement to each other uses the same verb that we get paraclete from.

What we have as ‘strengthen each other’ uses build one another up with connotations of a house-builder and constructing and confirming.

**What does this mean for us today?**

Maybe when reading Matthew 24:8-14 and Romans 13:11-14 you had a Josiah moment.

When King Josiah had the rediscovered book of the law read to him, he was deeply perturbed, because he saw throughout his kingdom God’s law being flouted to an alarming degree and he knew that because God’s words are true, that retribution was coming. Even though King Josiah did his best to turn his kingdom back to God, the impact of several unworthy kings before him was not possible to wipe out. However, God in His kindness promised Josiah that he would not see the retribution in his lifetime, and so it was, and the warfare that led to the Babylonian exile started shortly after his death.

These times of wrath and retribution have happened throughout bible history and Christian history. Consider the destruction of Tyre in bible history; and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD considered to be God’s response to rejecting salvation through Jesus; and the wipeout of the Mayan civilisation with its human sacrifices. Truly bad leaders like Ahaz and Jeroboam had their entire families wiped out by God’s decree.

We need to take this truth seriously. God’s wrath is real. Look how far the world around us has moved away from living according to God’s ten commandments - and realise that when the time of mercy ends that the time of justice and wrath will begin. After God’s dramatic reset, the cycle will begin again: a wholesale return to God under holy leaders and when sins pile up enough over time and hopefully after a very long time, justice and wrath again. Chastisements of such a nature are needed whenever we stray too far from God’s path, and they are proof that He loves us like a father.

St Paul in 1 Thess 5:1-11 tells us what to do to prepare and to survive times of retribution. Firstly we must live Godly lives and have absolutely no compromise with darkness.
Secondly we need to grow in faith, in hope and in the agape quality of love.
Then we need to encourage each other to do likewise.
Finally we need, with the help of the Holy Spirit’s charisms, in unity, to build up the earthly part of the temple of God in alignment with Jesus Christ our foundation stone.

So how do we build ourselves and each other up in faith, hope, and agape love? That’s the pressing question that we need to be answering.