

Matthew 25: 13 Keep awake
1 Thess 5:6. Let us keep awake.

I once read that the purpose of sermons is to equip people to deal with the tedium of life! “Keep awake”. Learn to keep awake lest you miss what God is doing before your eyes.

No-one slept during a sermon by Martin Luther King. He liked to tell a story in his sermons about sleeping and keeping awake. It was about Rip van Winkle. He used to say that *the one thing that we usually remember about the story is that Rip Van Winkle slept twenty years. But there is another point in that little story that is almost completely overlooked. It was the sign at the inn, from which Rip went up in the mountain for his long sleep.*

When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George the Third. When he came down twenty years later the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington—and looking at the picture he was amazed—he was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history—and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution. And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.

And that is what our two texts are about. In 1 Thessalonians St Paul says “Let us keep awake”. And in St Matthew. Jesus says “Keep awake”. Both texts mean the same thing: they both mean “Keep awake to be sure that you do not sleep through what God is doing.” You must not sleep through a revolution. The two texts are the same: yet they apply the meaning in opposite ways.

1 Thessalonians is probably the first book in the New Testament to be written. Maybe as much as thirty years before the earliest gospel; maybe only fifteen years after the death of Jesus. It is one of the New Testament letters that just about everyone – including the most sceptical scholars – believes was written by St Paul himself. The letter vibrates with the struggles and sufferings of the earliest Christians. They lived under the ever-present threat of persecution and even death. And it is full of kind of theology that sounds strange to us. St Paul believed firmly – at least at this early stage in the development of his thinking he believed strongly - that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, was about to return to earth to bring about God’s final judgment and the deliverance of his people. That was such an important part of the message to those early Christians who were justly terrified of their enemies. So, in the passage we read this morning we hear *The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...destruction will come upon them and there will be no escape...But you, beloved, are not in darkness....therefore let us keep awake.*

In this letter St Paul calls his readers to keep awake so that they avoid disaster. Keep awake to be prepared lest something terrible happens to you. Have you been captured, as I have, by David Attenborough’s latest television series? The next episode will be shown tonight. This is “Blue Planet 2”. It combines the most astonishing technical brilliance of photography and film-making with eye-popping displays of the wonder of the natural world – typical David Attenborough. But last Sunday night struck a terrible note of warning. The presenter identified plastic

waste as an enormous threat to life even in the deepest seas: and it is a threat caused entirely by human waste and human carelessness. Did you see the heart-breaking shots of the turtle flapping desperately to escape from a black plastic bag? Did you see the heart-breaking scene of the mother whale mourning – yes, mourning – the death of her newborn: a baby whale, which may very well, Attenborough argues, have perished by being poisoned by its mother's milk. The evidence suggests that the deadly poison entered the sea because of contamination by plastic waste.

In the commentary, Sir David said *Unless the flow of plastics and industrial pollution into the ocean is reduced, marine life will be poisoned by them for many centuries to come.* Michael Gove, Secretary of State for the Environment, tweeted *Still haunted by last night's BluePlanet - the imperative to do more to tackle plastic in our oceans is clear. We will work urgently to identify further action.*

Keep awake. Remember Rip van Winkle. Sleeping through a revolution could be literally fatal.

In St Matthew's gospel the call from Jesus is also to *Keep Awake*. Don't sleep through what God is doing. Again the theology is about watching for the coming of God's great day when the world will be judged and healed. But in Jesus' story the words *Keep awake* are not about avoiding something terrible, but about the risk of missing something very good. Ten bridesmaids are gathered for a wedding. Things are delayed and they fall asleep. However, five of them, before they fall asleep, make sure their lamps are ready. The other five don't bother. And when the festivities begin, those who fell asleep unprepared miss the whole thing. The message is: keep awake to be sure that you are ready for the party.

It is a common theme in Matthew's gospel. Life with God is like a party – be ready for the life God wants you to live. Don't be like Rip van Winkle and sleep through the life God wants for you. Is there some hurt which you have not forgiven? Is there some act of kindness that you keep putting off? Is there some change in your life to which your conscience calls you but which you think you might make the day after tomorrow? Could it be that it is the whole business of following Jesus, of trusting him with your very life, of plain obedience, which you have learned to sleep through? Could it be that the very thing that God is doing is inviting you to receive his forgiveness and share his love? Do you really want to sleep through the invitation to be the person you were made to be?

There is an urgency about the gospel, and there is an immediacy about the words and works of Jesus which we ignore. Somehow we imagine we can drift into Christian faith and Christian discipleship: that we can sleep into faith and hope and love. There is an urgency about the work and words of Jesus that we ignore all too easily. Keep awake. Learn to keep awake lest you miss what God is doing before your very eyes. Keep awake. Nowhere is it recorded that Jesus said *Love your enemies tomorrow*.

There is a story of three apprentice devils who had completed their training; and the Great Tempter himself summoned them to see if they were ready to be let loose on the human race. "What are you going to tell them?" he asked. "I'm going to tell them there is no heaven", said the first. "They won't believe you: go back and learn some more." The second one tried: "I'm going to tell them there is no hell." "They won't care: go back and learn some more." Then it was the turn of the third. "What are you going to tell them?" "I'm going to tell them there is no hurry." "On you go."