

When I was a teenage member of a Church Bible Class, Kings Own, I remember having set before me as a great example of faith and trust in God, the story of a woman who throughout the Blitz on London refused to go down into the air-raid shelter but insisted on sleeping in her own bed upstairs. "Well," she would say, "I says me prayers to God and I goes to bed, cos there's no need for both of us to keep awake, is there?" The implication, presumably, was that God would protect her from all the bombs that would be falling around her.

I remember thinking at the time "So she expects God to deflect any bomb that might be falling in her direction and to make it fall on someone else's house and blow them to pieces rather than her because she had faith and they didn't?" That's a bit tough on God, isn't it? In any case, shouldn't she, as a devout Christian, have been praying, if anything, for her neighbours to have been spared and she herself to be the sacrifice as it were ?

Some years later on, during the violent years of the MauMau uprisings in Kenya we were held enthralled when listening to a husband and wife missionary couple who had escaped the terror in Kenya, apparently because of their faith. They told us how one day the row of huts in which they were living was raided by an armed band of MauMau terrorists who had worked their way down the row systematically slaughtering the inhabitants with clubs and machetes. They heard the screams and cries of those being slaughtered as the gang worked their way closer and closer to their own hut. They fell on their knees and prayed to the good Lord to protect them and remained on their knees as the terrorists butchered their way towards them. By the grace of God, the murderous gang, having killed their next door neighbours, then bypassed their hut and continued to slaughter the rest of the row's inhabitants, leaving the faithful couple to survive and eventually make their way home to England. Really? Again, I thought, did they really expect God to get into the minds of the killers and persuade them only to murder the rest of the people in that row? That's a bit tough on God, isn't it? In any case, shouldn't they have been praying rather that the gang would spare the others and take themselves as the ones to be sacrificed?

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When Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, urged them to put on the 'breastplate of faith' in the face of whatever 'sudden destruction', as he called it, was likely to hit them, was that the kind of faith he had in mind?

Are we, in our time of 'sudden destruction' which we call Covid 19, being urged to have the kind of faith that leaves God to protect us while we get on with our lives in our usual way trusting that he will intervene if danger threatens? I don't think so. That's pretty tough on God and not the kind of life of faith I believe Paul is encouraging. The message for me is "Trust in the Lord but use the wisdom you were created with." You may remember my telling you once about the two statuettes I have of the Optimist and the Pessimist. The Pessimist's face is one of doom and gloom while the Optimist's is one of smiling delight in the sunshine of life. But, of the two, it's the Optimist who carries an umbrella.

I really don't believe that we few, those of us who are actually in this building at the moment are showing any lack of faith by not allowing you to be here with us or by keeping so far apart from each other that I have no idea what reaction the others are showing on their faces at what I am saying in the name of the Lord. I believe we are combining faith with practical good sense. You will know that there have been some churches – for the most part in other countries, until today when a church in London has decided to do the same – which have decided, in the interests of freedom of religion and the proclamation of the Gospel, to call together large numbers of their congregations to express their praise and worship together. You will also know that, as a result, people have contracted Covid 19 and some have died. I believe that, if we are to err, and we will, we should err on the side of caution and care.

I also believe that in what we are doing we are carrying out the rest of that quotation from Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Christians. Because the breastplate he urged his readers to put on was not only one of faith, but of faith and love. If we really want to show love for other people we really do have to make our own personal sacrifices. That might mean not going out to functions and places we would like to, however harmless to ourselves they

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might seem, because they might just be that closeness that passes Covid on to someone else. It seems obvious, but quite a lot of people don't seem to see it that way at the moment. It might mean putting the brakes on our usual pattern of life for just one of the years of the mercifully longer span of life many of us now enjoy. It might mean being a little bit cruel in our close relationships to be kind to those we love. Wearing that breastplate of faith and love may be good protection but it's quite a heavy breastplate to wear because it does carry with it a weight of responsibilities.

Paul also urged us to wear the 'helmet of salvation'.

I don't know about you, but the idea of dying does actually frighten me. I can think of two occasions when I have been afraid that I was going to die. The first was when I was in a car that was turning over in the dark and I had no idea how far it had to go before hitting the ground or something else. The second was after spinal surgery when it turned out that my spinal column had been peppered by splinters of bone and there appeared to be someone in my head very busy with a hammer and an anvil! I was frightened. Impending death did not feel like the 'nothing at-all' of that famous poem by Henry Scott Holland. It was Woody Allen who said "I'm not frightened of death – I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

What I'm not frightened about, though, is whatever may happen after death. If I'm right in seeing God in the person of Jesus; if, as we say in our Creed, Jesus is indeed of 'one being with the Father', the God I see in him is one of love, forgiveness, acceptance, and welcome. If I'm right about that, it ties in very nicely with something else Paul wrote in this letter to his fellow Christians in Thessalonica – "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord." So I don't have to worry about the after-life, I just have to think of myself as wearing that 'helmet of salvation'.

It sounds, then, as though Paul's first letter to those Thessalonian Christians could easily have been written for us Christians in Abbots Langley, or wherever, today in our plague-ridden times. "Therefore", as he wrote in the

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final lines of that part we read today, “encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing”.

Well I hope you are. All it needs is smiling at strangers as you pass them on your exercise walks; dropping tins and packets into the foodbanks in various place; phoning people who live on their own and would enjoy a chat now and again; or just putting yourself in other people’s shoes whenever you learn of whatever burdens they may be carrying and commending them to God in prayer.

That’s the way to do it.