

# Getting Ahead of Ourselves

*A sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28; Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 & Psalm 126*

*by Nathan Nettleton, 17 December 2017*

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## Message

As God's people, we celebrate life in the face of death, because we know that the victory of life has been secured.

## Sermon

From time to time you hear it said of someone that she "was ahead of her time." It usually means that there is something about the person's actions that later becomes normal, but which at the time was rather innovative or non-conformist. It is usually said as a compliment, but it is generally only offered in retrospect, by the people of the later era. In their own time, they are usually just seen as a bit odd or eccentric or perhaps troublesome. Others are not usually so impressed at the time. Instead of describing you admiringly as being ahead of your time, they are more likely to sneer, "you're getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't you?" It has a rather different feel, doesn't it?

Part of the message of this Advent season is that the followers of Jesus are to be people who live ahead of their time. We are to begin living now in ways that will one day become normal; in ways which will one day make sense, but which don't seem to quite fit in our present situation.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica and told them to rejoice and celebrate always, and be thankful in all circumstances, it would have made no sense at all if the only reference point was their present circumstances. The Thessalonian Christians were having a tough time. They were coping a lot of hostility and abusive treatment from others and they were really under the pump. Paul is not advocating some kind of masochistic pleasure in the present pain. Rather he is calling us to look beyond it and see that there is nevertheless much to celebrate.

He is asking us to do something that the psychologists call reframing. Sometimes, the way you feel about something, or react to it, is dependent on the size of the frame you draw around it. If you are experiencing serious pain in your chest, and you just focus on the immediate experience of the pain, then you may feel fearful and despondent. But if you focus on the fact that yesterday you had a life-saving heart transplant, and the present pain is a short term side effect of the life-saving surgery, then your dominant feeling is more likely to be relief and joy. It is all a matter of how wide you draw the frame.

We do this reframing thing quite naturally in ordinary conversation. You'll hear someone say, "There's a crippling drought, but you're upset about a bit of rain on your Christmas barbecue?!" Reframing! Are you looking at the big picture or the small? Which is dominating the way you feel about life and the world around you? The phrase, "first world problems", which has become popular in the last few years is a punchy little call to do a bit of reframing.

Often our examples are saying that the big picture is actually worse than the trivialities of what we get preoccupied with, but Paul is asking us to draw the frame bigger again until we see a picture worth kicking up our heels and celebrating over.

Interestingly, John the baptiser does something quite similar when the Jerusalem inquisition comes out to demand some answers from him. When they ask him why on earth he is baptising people if he is not the Messiah, not the reincarnation of Elijah, and not the prophet like Moses, he doesn't actually answer their question, but he reframes it.

In effect he says, "Look, you lot are so focussed on me that you are missing the bigger picture. I am just giving people a symbolic bath, but right there in the midst of you – rubbing shoulders with you even – is one you haven't even noticed, let alone recognised. He is the One who is coming to take over where I leave off, and let me tell you that when he gets into action, you'll be wondering why you wasted your time worrying about anything as insignificant as what I'm up to. All I'm here to do is point to the bigger picture, and you lot haven't looked any further than the little bloke doing the pointing!"

Isaiah too is on the same sort of track. "The Lord has filled me with the Holy Spirit and sent me to bring good news to the downtrodden, to announce freedom to the prisoners, and to heal the broken-hearted." It doesn't say he is sent to break the captives out of detention centres, but to preach a message of freedom; to reframe the situation; to enable them, and their oppressors, to see beyond the barbed wired and the razor ribbon and to catch a glimpse of the coming day of the Lord when those who have sown in tears will reap great rewards, singing and dancing and laughing; when those who have been trampled down and known nothing but despair will be lifted up rejoicing and made strong like great big trees planted by the Lord.

Reframing. Looking at the bigger picture and allowing the bigger picture to determine how we will live and act in the here and now. Rejoice and celebrate always, and be thankful in all circumstances, because when you look at the bigger picture of what God is coming to do, you can see that the pain of the present will not have the last word. It is just a step on the way to a great new reality.

As Paul put it in another letter, you begin to see the pain of the present as the labour pains of creation as it brings the new reality to birth. And as most mothers will tell you, the ultimate experience of reframing is the way the pain of labour is subsumed under the anticipation of birth.

This is not some escapist claptrap. It is not a minimising of very real suffering, and it is not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die as a way of muting the protest about the pain and injustice of the present. Rather it is an active and potent protest against the harsh realities of the present, and an aggressive refusal to let them dictate the terms and conditions of our lives. It is a confident assertion that the war against injustice has already been won, and that the only reason we are still seeing injustice is that we are living in the period between the announcement of the victory and the full implementation of the post-war peace conditions.

In case you're not convinced, let me put this in the context of a real life situation of injustice and suffering. If we were on the front line of the protests outside the Immigration Detention Centres like Manus Island, what would be the most potent and effective attitude we could adopt? Our dominant attitude could be that of anger and hostility: "We hate this place and all it stands for, it makes us ashamed, and we are here to give vent to our anger." Or our dominant attitude could be that of wishful thinking: "It would be much better if these poor

people were released into the community and we are here to express our wish that that might happen.”

Or our dominant attitude could be that of joyous hope: “The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to announce freedom and to celebrate God’s victory over injustice and the powers of death. We have come to bring God’s laughter where despair has reigned, to celebrate freedom in the face of oppression, to hand streamers and balloons and glasses of champagne through the barbed wire and to party with those who the Prince of Peace is coming to set free.”

Perhaps it makes no sense, but if you look at the history of the spiritual songs of the American slaves or the freedom songs of the black South African people, you will see that the most powerful weapons were not words of rage, but songs of joyous anticipation. “Freedom, O freedom, O freedom, freedom is coming, O yes I know.”

Folks, we are called to be a people who are ahead of our time, a people who can celebrate now the coming of the reign of peace that we have glimpsed and tasted as it drew near to us in the one who suffered the worst the world can do, but rose above it and drew around it a new and bigger frame of resurrection life and the joyous freedom of the reign of God.

Yes others may sneer and say that we’re getting a bit ahead of ourselves, but they’ve always said that about people who were ahead of their time. And joyous hope is contagious. It is our refusal to let the powers of death dictate our lives, and our insistence on looking at and celebrating the bigger picture of the tomb-breaking power of love, that will inspire and empower others to join us in making straight the way of the Lord and celebrating the coming of the one who brings us home singing, laughing and holding high the harvest of eternal joy.