

2 Thess 2 The Antichrist
Tim Anderson 12/9/21

Anglicans are very polite people.
I'm not sure if you've noticed that.
Maybe you just think how Anglicans are
is how the whole Christian world is.
But at Holy Trinity we have many members
who have long standing memberships in other denominations.
I have to say this is a beautiful thing that I thank God for regularly.
Our brothers and sisters who aren't Anglican
will have noticed some of the peculiarities of Anglicans,
and one of them is how polite Anglicans are.
My Presbyterian and Baptist mates
will happily start a vigorous discussion about some point of doctrine.
When you should baptise kids or Predestination or something.
Anglicans rarely instigate theological arguments.
My Pentecostal friends are ready to denounce the government
for not allowing services to take place during lockdown,
but the polite Anglicans are just doing things on Zoom.
How did we become so polite?

Some of it is about our English heritage.
The English are very polite.
You don't know an Australian accepts you until they insult you for fun.
The English are far more genteel.
They are so polite, they drop hints if they want you to do something.
They think it would be so rude to actually ask you,
because then you might refuse.
And that would be a calamity.
Far better to drop a hint,
and then if you choose to say 'No',
well you were never asked so no one is offended.
Except secretly they really are offended,
they are just too polite to tell you.

But our Anglican politeness is not just English politeness. It's also got to do with the history of the church of England. The Church of England began under King Henry VIII. He would change his allegiance to protestants and Roman Catholics as it suited his politics. He did the old switcheroo manoeuvre many times. After Henry came his son Edward VI. He was a staunch protestant but he died when he was only 16 years old. Following Edward came Queen Mary his half sister. Mary was a staunch Catholic. She burned lots of Protestants at the stake including Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, and bishops Nicholas Ridley (Hence Ridley College) and Hugh Latimer. So the thing was if you were an Anglican clergyman and you liked having your head firmly attached to your neck and not being cooked on an open fire, then you became very polite about matters of theological disagreement. Politeness was a survival strategy. If you said anything too definite, then who knows when there might be a new king on the throne, and who knows what would happen then?

What's politeness got to do with 2 Thess 2?

Well 2 Thess 2 is largely devoted to a figure we call the antichrist. This is not the antichrist's only outing in the NT. Jesus speaks of false teachers who will lead people astray. Mt 24:24 "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive if possible, even the elect."

1 John talks about the antichrist.

And he makes an appearance in Revelation.

But my bet is that if you've been a lifelong Anglican, you would have never heard a sermon on the Antichrist.

But if you've been a Baptist or a Brethren,

you probably think it's quite normal to speak about the Antichrist. Maybe you can fill me in afterwards if my supposition is true. The thing is that it's hard to be polite in talking about the antichrist. If you talk about the antichrist, people want to know who it is. And it's not at all polite to call someone the antichrist.

Across history there have been many candidates.

The antichrist is actually the fulfilment of a prophecy of Daniel. Daniel foretold the coming of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the king of Syria.

In 163BC, Antiochus enter the Temple in Jerusalem with his army. He slaughtered a pig to his gods on the altar in the temple.

You can imagine how disgusted the Jews were at an unclean animal being sacrificed to false gods in their temple.

Antiochus became a prototype of the Antichrist.

Jesus picks up the language of Daniel's prophecy and reapplies it to the destruction of the temple

that would occur a couple of decades after Jesus' death and resurrection in AD70.

A decade after that, we have the Roman Emperor Domitian, who demanded that he be worshipped as 'Lord and God'.

He is the most likely first reference to the beast in Rev 13.

Calling yourself names that should only be applied to God is a dead giveaway for an antichrist figure.

Well the identification of antichrists

didn't stop with the conclusion of the writing of the Scriptures.

When the Roman Empire was falling in the 5th century,

with the bishop of Rome at the heart of God's church,

many Christians believed the leader of the Vandals was the antichrist.

The Vandals being the tribe who sacked Rome,

not teenagers armed with spray cans.

In the 10th-12th century

when Christians were being encouraged to join the crusades,

many Christians believed that Mohamed was the antichrist.

He had after all taken Jerusalem from Christians

and built a Mosque on the Temple Mount.
Towards the end of the Middle Ages,
so Franciscan monks believed the pope was the antichrist.
They used the language of v4 of our reading to justify their view.
"He will oppose and will exalt himself
over everything that is called God or is worshiped,
so that he sets himself up in God's temple,
proclaiming himself to be God."

A couple more centuries on,
and the Protestant reformers: Luther, Calvin and friends,
had decided that the institution of the papacy
rather than one particular pope,
was the antichrist.

The Popes responded by branding Martin Luther himself
as the antichrist.

Surely someone who brought such division
to the unity of God's church must be the antichrist.

In more recent centuries, folks have focused on political bad guys
as their top pick for the antichrist.

Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin were all popular picks.

Or unpopular picks if you think about it in a different way.

Well what does 2 Thessalonians have to say?

I don't think it encourages us to speculate on who the antichrist is.

That doesn't seem to be particularly profitable.

And if you look at the range of figures
who have been labelled the antichrist over history,
it seems clear that we have a tendency
to label whoever is the bad guy we feel most aggrieved about
as the antichrist.

Now 1 John does tell us that there will be many antichrist type figures,
before the coming of big one

who comes right before the return of Jesus.

So it's not wrong to see multiple antichrist type figures.

But rather than labelling individuals,

I think the best way forward is to look for characteristics.
 What are the traits that will mark out the antichrist?
 And what should we do so as not to be deceived by the antichrist?

So the traits of the antichrist.

1. He must appear before the return of Christ.

The whole reason for Paul talking about the antichrist in 2 Thess 2 is because some people had unsettled the church by saying that Jesus had already returned.

Paul's response is that, Jesus can't possibly have returned yet, because the antichrist hasn't come yet.

So next time someone tells you that they think that Jesus' return is imminent, then ask them who they think the antichrist is. Should make for an interesting conversation.

2. The antichrist is marked by lawlessness and he foments rebellion.

To be lawless is to have no regard for the established rules of an institution or a society.

It goes hand in hand with rebellion.

If you have no regard for rules and you see yourself as a leader, then you will encourage others to have no regard for rules.

And that's where rebellions come from.

I guess the question is

"What kind of lawlessness is the antichrist marked by?"

Could it be someone who encourages others to break the lockdown rules imposed by the government for example?

Well no.

The authority that the antichrist is railing against is not the authority of governments, it's the authority of God's apostles and it's the authority of God himself.

So the antichrist exalts himself and tells people to worship him instead of worshipping God. That would make him a figure like Kim Jong Un who has the people of North Korea worshipping him.

But Kim is not the antichrist,
 he's just an antichrist,
 because his influence is not world wide enough to be the final figure
 who precedes the return of Christ.

3. The antichrist is no match for Jesus.

2:8 tells us, "And then the lawless one will be revealed,
 whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth
 and destroy by the splendour of his coming."

It doesn't sound

like the contest between the antichrist and Jesus will be a pitched battle.
 Instead, the antichrist will be instantly and totally defeated
 at the coming of Jesus.

It's like the tough guy runs amok in the classroom,
 until the teacher returns.

But then instantly the teacher opens the door,
 order is restored.

Except it's even more one sided than that.

But we should also see some symbolism
 in how Jesus overthrows the antichrist.

The breath of his mouth has to be symbolic of his word.

In Revelation, Jesus fights with a sword coming out of his mouth.
 Just as God created the world by his word,
 so he will judge the world by his word.

And the antichrist will be at the head of the queue for judgement.

Jesus also overthrows the antichrist by the splendour of his coming.

Of course if the antichrist deceives people into following him
 then he's going to do that with counterfeit displays of splendour.

"Come and marvel at my splendour and worship me," he says.

But when Jesus returns,

the splendour of his coming will be such

that the antichrist's pretensions to splendour will be obviously fake.

A McDonald's burger might make a child's mouth water.

But once you've been to Homestock,

well it's all over for McDonalds.

4. That leads into the fourth trait of the antichrist.
 What kind of splendour does he use to try to deceive people?
 2:9 "He will use all sorts of displays of power
 through signs and wonders that serve the lie,
 and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing."
 The primary splendour that the antichrist uses is miraculous splendour.
 People see a miracle
 and they conclude that the miracle worker must be sent from God.
 But that's not the case,
 the devil and his servants are quite capable
 of doing miracles to deceive people.
 Many times Christians are led off track
 by miracles and reports of miracles.
 Instead of doing the hard work
 of measuring up what they are being taught with the word of God,
 they are seduced into accepting a teacher uncritically
 because of the miracles that surround their ministry.
 The antichrist is going to be surrounded by miracles.
 You wouldn't want to let the presence of miracles make you gullible.
 It's not just the final antichrist
 but also the antichrists along the way
 who will use miracles to deceive people.
 So if miracles aren't a reliable guide,
 how do we assess if someone is the genuine article?

Well that leads us into the second question about this passage.
 We've looked at the traits of the antichrist.
 Now how do we avoid being deceived by him?
 Paul tells the Thessalonians
 that the antichrist will use signs and wonders to deceive people.
 But what of those people who are deceived?
 2:10 "They perish
 because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.
 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion
 so that they will believe the lie

and so will be condemned with all who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness."

In this verse, the vaccine against the being deceived by the antichrist is to love the truth and believe the truth.

As far as the Thessalonians themselves go, in verse 13 Paul says, "But we ought always to thank God for you brothers and sisters loved by the Lord,

because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth."

The part that God does in to make them holy through the Holy Spirit. The part that the Thessalonians do is to believe the truth.

After they've been saved, what does Paul encourage them to do so they will be safe from the threat of the antichrist?

Verse 15, "So then brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

There's a consistent theme running through these verses. If you want to be safe from the deception of the antichrist, then you believe the truth.

The truth that you believe is the message that Paul gave the Thessalonians.

For them that was spoken as well as written.

For us that is the written word of the Scriptures.

That word, Paul describes as his gospel in verse 14.

By immersing themselves in God's truth, then when the plausible and enticing deceptions of the antichrist come along, they won't get sucked in by them.

Frankly this is an important warning for the church in Australia today. Not so much for Holy Trinity Hastings. But for much of the Australian Church, we've become pretty light on

with holding fast to the teachings that have been passed on to us.
I've been to church services where there was no Bible reading.
Church services where the pastor's sermon
made little if any reference to the Scriptures.
I've sent my children who were much younger at the time
to a Sunday School program
that was entirely centred around the football grand final,
and God didn't rate a mention in the entire program.
The folk who run this stuff are well meaning.
But they are not equipping the people in their care
to stand firm and hold fast.
When the bright lights and the groovy programs of the antichrist
roll into town, these people are going to fall for it hook line and sinker.
Because what they've been trained to look for
is bright lights and groovy programs.

And let's face it, there has always been lightweight stuff,
substituting for serious engagement with the word of God.
It might be smoke machines and a rock concert atmosphere now.
Back in the day,
it was who could get a beautiful white dress for their confirmation.
Which churches ran Saturday night dances in the church hall
that were great meeting places for young people
looking for a life partner.
Which churches had a cricket club or a tennis club
to provide wholesome activities for the young folk.
It all sounds innocent.
But when it doesn't equip people to stand firm and hold fast,
then those folk are defenceless against the wiles of the evil one.

If you want to be prepared to avoid the deceptions of the antichrist,
you need to stand firm and hold fast to the teaching of the gospel.
But standing firm and holding fast
isn't the only thing we are aiming for.
The other danger we face when we are confronted by the powers of evil

is that we might become emotionally strung out by it.
Just like when we face a serious physical threat to our safety,
like a pandemic, it's easy to be emotionally affected.
So too when we face a spiritual threat.
It's easy to waste energy worrying.
Paul says to the Thessalonians,
2:1-2 "We ask you brothers and sisters,
not to become easily unsettled or alarmed."
How do we maintain an even keel?
By the power of God encouraging us and giving us hope.
2:16-17 "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself
and God our Father who loved us
and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,
encourage your hearts
and strengthen you in every good deed and word."
God's gift to us is an eternal encouragement.
It's not just a strategy to get through the next crisis.
It's an encouragement that he has things sorted out for eternity.
That you are his loved child and nothing can snatch you from his grasp.
That he chose you before the creation of the world to be his.
And you will still be his when this universe is no more.

It is important that we learn about the antichrist,
so we don't get blasé about the ways the evil one will try to trip us up.
But it's just as important that having learned we are not unsettled.
God has his hand on you.
The devil can do his worst.
But God has given you an eternal encouragement and good hope.