

Sermon 23rd Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 27], Yr. A @ St Johns – 8/11/20
“Encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)
- Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Father, bless us in this time, lead us in your Word, and open our hearts by your Spirit, in Jesus' name, Amen.

From time to time, when we as pastors visit with those who are dying we hear them share of their longing to be home. Some mean it literally, and some eternally. They might say, “*Pastor, I wish I was home... I wish I could come to worship again... I hope that Jesus will take me home soon.*” You may have heard it expressed by a loved one as well. We are blessed these days to benefit from modern medicine, care and good diets that we can live full and longer lives than ever before in history. But as a result, we can tire of life and living. We can be exhausted by the ongoing struggle that life is... we can be exhausted by the physical or emotional pain we feel... by the heartache of missing those we love and longing to be with them... and we can long for the day Christ will bring us to our eternal and true home in His Kingdom.

There's nothing we can imagine more fulfilling and joyful than being welcomed into eternity, the place that Christ has promised to prepare for us (Jn. 14:2). There will be nothing that compares to the joy we will experience when we can finally and fully be with Jesus, *and*, with *all* the hosts of heaven – with angels, archangels, and the whole company of believers – those who are in Christ whom we have temporarily had to let go of, but who we will see again in God's Kingdom. God's Kingdom will be like a great family reunion – one that we will *never* forget!

One of the questions people often have is about what exactly happens when we die. It's a question that all of us asks, but none of us have any *true* conception of – until the day we die. It's a question that the believers in Thessalonica have as they try to understand their newly forming belief in Christ as Lord and Saviour. The Thessalonian Christians were worrying that their loved ones, their relatives and friends, who were also believers and had died, would somehow miss out and not be present to see and receive Christ when He gloriously returns on the Day of Judgement. St. Paul wants them not to grieve like others who live without Christ and the hope of the resurrection and eternal life, so, he comforts and encourages them by teaching the faith, that he also has received.

Paul talks about those who ‘sleep in death,’ employing a common Jewish euphemism and metaphor for death (1 Thess. 4:13). Jesus Himself speaks like this in regards to those who have died, like Lazarus (Jn. 11:11) and Jairus' daughter (Mk. 5:39). Calling it ‘sleep’ helped to soften the sense of death – it's finality and grief. The reality of death in ancient times was commonly accompanied by many ideas,

beliefs, fears and terrors as people grappled with it. The fear of death is no less powerful today.

Sleep is often the New Testament description of dead believers, although not to *ignore* the harsh reality of death, but because in a way, it accurately describes the *mystery* of the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15:51). As the body of the believing Christian lies dormant in death, so it will rise to life on the Day of the resurrection. Therefore, death is merely like sleep *for the Christian* – for believers in Christ.

Remember back to our early childhood, the strange but comforting experiences we had of travelling somewhere with our parents and then later in the day falling into an exhausted sleep – on the couch, a bed or in the car. The next thing we remember is waking up the next morning at home and in *our own* bed, safe and sound. From the time we fell asleep to waking up, we missed much in between – being carried to the car, the journey, the time it took, being dressed in our PJ's and then placed and tucked safely in our beds, all being oblivious to what happened in the journey to get us where we are, yet, we have been kept safe by those who love and care for us. So too perhaps at life's end, the child of God can safely fall asleep in Jesus, confident of the resurrection to eternal life (1 Thess. 4:13-14).

St. Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonica of an early Christian creed: "*For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him*" (v.14). He then goes on to unpack what Christians believe will happen in the 'last times' – this is called, '*eschatology*.'

Have you ever heard people talk about "*the rapture*"? Some Christians use the term to describe what will happen at Jesus' return: When Jesus appears and descends from the clouds, Christians will be caught up from the earth, lifted up (raptured) to heaven to be with the Lord. It is similar to the picture St. Paul describes to the Thessalonians. Although, those who talk about "the rapture" hold their view with one huge difference. Christians who talk about a "rapture" are considered "*Millennialists*," or more accurately, "*Premillennialists*." Generally, they believe that when Christ physically returns at the Second Coming, there will be the first resurrection where believers will rise from death and those who are then alive will be taken up, 'raptured' to heaven. When that's done, they believe the world will suffer a time of tribulation, or, keep going as it is, but Christ will reign as a mighty king on earth and run things with a golden-age of peace for a *literal* one thousand years. After this, there will be a second and final resurrection and Day of Judgement. Hence, *pre-millennialism*. This view of the Biblical apocalypse was recently popularised in the late 90's and early 2000's with the release of the fictional series of books called, "*Left Behind*," by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (1995-2007). Premillennialism is based upon a literal interpretation of Revelation 20 (v.1-6), which describes Jesus's reign for a period of a thousand years. But, if we are

wise, we will 'hold off' from taking a merely literal interpretation of Revelation's visions, allegories and prophecies at this point.

Why? For one reason, every other Bible text referring to the end times shares a much simpler view, including our texts today, along with Jesus' own teaching. What is clear about the end times is this, when Christ returns, it'll be the end of the world. There will be the resurrection *of all* the dead. Then, all believers – those who've died and those still living – will be taken to be with Christ; all unbelievers will be banished to hell or eternal separation from God's grace and love. The world here will then end, and there will be a *new* perfect heaven and earth where God's people will live. This view is backed by the Old and New Testament Scriptures. This is called "*Amillennialism*" (*not*-Millennialism) where we hold that the 1,000 years is a metaphor or symbol for heaven and our eternal 'peace', rest and joy with God and all believers in Christ. The LCA has a Doctrinal Statement on the last times if you want to read more carefully about it with all the supporting Biblical texts [DSTO 1A VII: Eschatological Matters, <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/>].

Along with Jesus' own parables about the Kingdom of God, St. Paul also underlines this understanding for us today. *"According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever"* (v.15-17).

So, we at least have a basic idea of what will perhaps happen on the Last Day. So, what's the point of sharing this today? Well, St. Paul wants to *encourage us* with these words – that's how he ends this passage – *"Therefore, encourage one another with these words"* (v.18). As those who struggle not only with the things of life and living, we also struggle very much along the way with our death and dying. So, Paul wants us to be at peace as those who are already *in Christ*, and not to worry about these things and what will happen or when. He is reminding us that the Lord has us in His care. Our Lord will sort things out when the time for the Last Day comes. In fact, He will even sort things out for us when our time comes to face death, on *our* last day, as well.

After Paul comforts these Thessalonian believers with the Biblical truth of Christ's Second coming and the resurrection, he then tells them, and us, to *encourage* or comfort others with these very words – for *all* who are *in Christ* will enjoy His return, the resurrection of their glorified bodies, and being together... *especially with the Lord, always!*

Just think, we, who believe in Jesus' death and resurrection, that He died for our sins on the Cross and rose again, will always *be* with the Lord! When our living Lord returns, when He comes once again, with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of His trumpet heralding victory, it will be such an amazing event! It will be what *we*, the Church, God's people, have been praying, celebrating and singing about throughout the years – "*Lord, Your kingdom come*" – it will finally be a full reality. St. Paul encourages us, "*we will always be with the Lord,*" our souls and our resurrected bodies, with no more sin, death, sickness or afflicted by grief or evil or the power of Satan; *we* will see Jesus as He truly is, and *we* will *never* ever be separated from Him!

It reaffirms and reminds us that we have a Lord who cares for us... who will even take care of us through death, the Last Days, and into eternal life. He will carry us, like a child asleep, to our true home, where we will wake and see with joy the great things that the Lord will one day do. No, we are not totally uninformed about death or what is to come. Instead, our Lord and those of His servants, share these treasures to encourage us – so that we will not be filled with grief, or be without hope. Instead, we look forward to that Day, being prepared, encouraging and preparing others by sharing the Good News, and waiting faithfully for our Lord in hopeful expectation of the joy that awaits us in His Kingdom. Amen.