

1 THESS 4.13-18: A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

As a church we are going through a period when we are very conscious of death. Last Monday week we had the funeral of Margaret Saville; last Wednesday we had the funeral of Mary Small; tomorrow we have the funeral of Jean Amey; and yet another of our long-standing church members, Ken Turton, is in the process of dying.

It seems therefore appropriate for us tonight to tackle the theme of death, bereavement, and the life to come, and to do so in the light 1 Thess 4.13-18.

DEATH IS A BAD BUSINESS

V13: **“Our brothers and sisters, we want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not be sad, as are those who have no hope”**

In the Bible death is described as the **“King of Terrors”** (Job 18.14). True, Job was writing before the coming of Jesus, but the reality is that death is a fearful process.

Paul, the other side of the resurrection, described death as a **“the last enemy”** (1 Cor15.26). True, it is a defeated enemy, but it is still an enemy!

Death – for those who remain behind is always a loss. It may be **“gain”** for those who enter into the presence of their Lord (see Phil 1.21), but it is a loss for family and friends.

Martin Luther once described God as *‘the greatest adulterer’* because he broke the closest human relationship!

As a result we grieve. Yes, Christians grieve.

I confess that I don't like the GNB translation – for the term “sad” is not strong enough.

The NRSV and other translations use the term **“grieve”**. The underlying Greek word (*lupeo*) is a strong word and means *“to be sorrowful, to be distressed, to grieve, to mourn”*.

We may not **“grieve as others do who have no hope”** (NRSV), but we still do grieve.

In the words of John Stott: *“To be sure, it is appropriate at Christian funerals joyfully to celebrate Christ's decisive victory over death, but we do so only through tears of personal sorrow”* (Thess 94).

Although we do not grieve as those who have no hope – we still do grieve!

Grieving is part of the cost of loving, and is the normal response to the loss of a significant person in our lives. There would be something wrong in our relationship if we did not shed copious tears when a loved one dies.

In this respect I find it significant that **Jesus**, for instance, **wept** at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11.35). If Jesus felt free to cry, so too should we.

If we don't express our grief, then all kinds of psychological complications can arise. In the words of the Turkish proverb: *"He that conceals his grief finds no remedy for it"*.

Crying is in fact good for us. As a result, one of my first questions when I visit a home where there has been a death is to ask the relatives: "Have you felt able to cry?"

However, there is no need to feel guilty if tears do not come immediately. Tears come at different times for different people.

Unfortunately some Christians encourage the bereaved to rejoice in the new life which their loved ones now enjoy, as if crying for the loss of a loved one is wrong and is a sign of lack of faith. But this refusal to face up to the pain of death and to own our own loss is nonsense. Life for our loved ones, now free of their earthly limitations, may now be much better, but we may well be the poorer for our loss.

Catherine Marshall, who lost her minister-husband Peter, aged only 46, has some instructive words about not trying to hide our emotions: *"Trying to force oneself to be brave will not heal the heart. This is hard for men who are trained to believe that tears are the sign of weakness. But it is forever true that when the storms of life are savage, it is the tree that bends with the wind that survives. Tensing up, walling up the heart, damning up the tears, will inevitably mean trouble later on, perhaps years later. There is emotional release in letting the tears flow"*

It is important that we realise that grieving takes time. Grieving cannot be restricted to the time between the death and the funeral. We do not get over the loss of a loved one that quickly. It is generally reckoned that the grieving process can take anywhere between two to five years, and in some cases even longer. Clearly the latter part of the grieving process will not be as acute as the first few months. But, thank God, time does heal. Although we never forget our loved one, the pain of parting does ease, as we learn to cope with our loss.

BUT let's go back to our text: **"We want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not be sad [grieve], as are those who have no hope"**. What caused Paul to raise this particular topic?

It would appear that in his brief stay at Thessalonica Paul had led the new church there to believe that Jesus would be returning very soon to usher in God's final kingdom and to welcome his people into his presence. Indeed,

the hope of the 'second coming' is very evident in this letter: so in the opening few verses Paul in 1 Thess 1.9,10 speaks of how the Thessalonians **"turned away from idols to God, to serve the true and living god and to wait for his Son to come from heaven – his Son Jesus, whom he raised from death and rescues us from God's anger that is coming"**.

But in the few months that had elapsed since Paul's visit, not only had Jesus not returned, but also some of the new Christians at Thessalonica had died. These deaths had come as a great shock to many in the church, and had caused them to wonder what the future held for their loved ones. It was therefore in response to their doubts and concerns that Paul wrote to reassure his new converts. For although 'death is a bad business', there is **hope**.

As Christians we can have a very positive view of the future. Here in 1 Thess 4 the Christian hope can be summed up in five 'rs'. Yes, children at school may need to know their three rs (writing, reading and arithmetic), but Paul was concerned for the five rs:

1. RESURRECTION – our hope is in the risen Lord Jesus

V14: **"We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him"**.

"We believe" – and the belief brings **"hope"**.

The resurrection of Jesus is no one-off, but rather is the ground of hope for all who put their trust in Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus may not be likened to a single rabbit which God pulls out of the hat to demonstrate that Jesus is his Son.

No, the resurrection of Jesus is the basis for your resurrection and mine.

As Paul writes in 1 Cor 15.20: **"Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised"**; or as Paul puts it here in 1 Thess 4.14 the corollary of the death and resurrection of Jesus is **"that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him"**.

Literally, in 1 Thess 4.14 Paul writes: God will take back with Jesus **"those who have fallen asleep"** believing in Jesus.

Paul is here employing a euphemism for death, a euphemism which in the ancient world had fairly negative connotations. The Greek playwright Aeschylus, e.g., refers to death as *"one unending night of sleep"*. Similarly the Roman poet Catullus wrote: *"The sun can set and rise again, but once our brief light sets, there is one unending night to be slept through"*.

However from a Christian perspective this euphemism has very positive connotations.

For the believer death is as natural as sleeping. Just sleep holds no terror for any one, neither does death hold any terror for those who believe – for one day we shall wake up to a new life lived in God's nearer presence. Martin Luther put it this way: *"I shall go to sleep and I shall know nothing more until an angel knocks on my tombstone and says, 'Time to get up, Dr Luther! Judgment Day!'"*

We are, of course, dealing with a picture, a metaphor. But nonetheless the essential truth is this. Death is not the end: **"God will take back those who have died believing in Jesus"**. This is why we need **"not be sad, as are those who have no hope"**.

Of course we are sad when friends like Mary Small & Jean Amey die, but we are sad for us, and not for them.

2. RETURN – Jesus will come back for us

"What we are teaching you now is the Lord's teaching: we who are alive on the day when the Lord comes will not go ahead of those who have died. There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first, then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them" (vv15-17a)

Here we have what is the fullest description of Christ's return in the NT.

As Paul looks ahead to the Lord's return, he distinguishes between two groups: **"those who have died"** and those **"who are alive on the day the Lord returns"** (v15).

The clear impression is that at this early stage – and remember he was writing around AD 50 – Paul anticipates belonging to the latter groups, for twice he writes of **"we who are alive"** (vv15,17), whereas in his later writings he reckons with the possibility, if not the likelihood, of his own death (1 Cor 6.14; 2 Cor 4.14; Phil 1.20).

However we should not make too much of this apparent change of emphasis. For as we see in 5.1, Paul – like Jesus – refused to speculate about the timing of the end.

Indeed, he writes that **"the Day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night"** (5.2) – it will be at a time no one expects.

Paul's concern was with the fact of Christ's coming back for us, and not **"whether we are alive or dead when he comes"** (5.10)

When the Lord returns, **"we who are alive... will not go ahead of those who have died"** (v15).

It would appear that there were those at Thessalonica who feared that their loved ones who had died in Christ would be at a disadvantage.

But Paul stresses that the dead in Christ will not miss out on anything.

On the great day of resurrection **"There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven"** (v16).

It is a moot [point whether or not we should distinguish **"the shout of command"** from **"the archangel's voice"** and **"the trumpet call"**].

Probably they are but three different ways of expressing the same thought.

The shout of command is likened to the voice of an archangel and to the sound of a trumpet.

The words of Paul echo here the words of Jesus regarding the coming of the Son of Man. **"What we are teaching you now is the Lord's teaching"**, teaching which for instance we find in Matt 24.30,31 (... **All the peoples of the earth will weep as they see the son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. The great trumpet will sound, and he will send out his angels to the four corners of the earth, and they will gather his chosen people from one end of the world to the others**).

Both Jesus and Paul were taking up traditional Jewish symbols relating to the End Times, and then applying them to the distinctive Christian concept that at the end of time Christ will return to wind up the historical process. The symbols themselves may be culturally conditioned, but the concept itself cannot be interpreted away.

If the truth be told, some Christians are embarrassed by this concept. They would prefer what they believe to be a more sophisticated form of the Christian faith. But this facet of Christian believing is not an optional extra. CS Lewis was right when he wrote: *"It seems to me impossible to retain in any recognisable form our belief in the divinity of Christ and the truth of the Christian revelation while abandoning, or even persistently neglecting, the promised and threatened return"*.

'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again', these words repeated every Sunday in the Anglican form of the communion service, are of the essence of the Christian faith.

Jesus will come back again for both the living and the dead – here is why **"we do not grieve as those without hope"**.

3. RAPTURE - We will meet the Lord

“Then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v17)

This coming of the Lord in glory is marked by an event traditionally known as the ‘*rapture*’. Our English word ‘rapture’ is derived from the Latin equivalent (*rapere*) of the underlying Greek verb (*harpazo*) which often implies violent action.

When the “**living**” are “**gathered up... in the clouds**”, they are ‘**seized**’ or ‘**snatched away**’ by the irresistible power of God so as “**to meet the Lord in the air**”.

Traditionally this verse has been interpreted of the saints marching heavenwards.

However, it is much more likely that Paul was thinking of the Christian who are alive going out to meet King Jesus and then accompanying him back to earth. For the underlying Greek phrase was often used to describe the action of the leading citizens of a town who would go out to meet a visiting dignitary with a view to escorting him back to their city.

- The same phrase is found in Acts 28.15 where Luke describes how Paul was met by the Roman Christians some miles from the city
- It is also found in Matt 25.6, where the bridal party goes out to meet the bridegroom with a view to escorting him back to the wedding banquet.

Although it is true that this interpretation is not demanded by the text, it nonetheless accords with Paul’s expectation of a “**creation...set free from its slavery to decay**” (Rom 8.21). The fact is that Paul and the early church in general (see 2 Pet 3.13; Rev 21.1,10) looked forward to a new order of life in a new world of God’s making.

Needless to say, the details of these events are not to be pressed. Ultimately these events defy description.

What we have here is not so much a detailed programme as an artist’s impression.

We are dealing here not with prose but with poetry.

Yet underlying the pictures is an essential truth. Christ is coming again in triumph.

And when he comes in unimaginable grandeur, with an irresistible authority the Lord will rouse who are ‘sleeping’, “**and those who have died believing in**

Christ will rise to life first". Far from missing out those who have died "in Christ" will be the first to experience his glory.

Here again is cause for us not to "**grieve as those who have no hope**".

4. REUNION – We will be re-united

"We will be [gathered up along] with them" (v17)

The coming of the Lord is marked by a reunion, when the dead and the living are reunited in Christ.

What a wonderful thought this must have been for the Thessalonians. They would be together again with their loved ones who had died in Christ. Death may separate us from our loved ones, but in Christ we are brought together.

True, earthly relationship will no longer have the significance they once did. The marriage bond, for instance, has only significance in this world (see Luke 20.34,35).

And yet the implication of the Biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body as we find it in 1 Cor 15 is that we shall recognise our loved ones. For this doctrine affirms that we shall still be persons and not just disembodied spirits, even though it be a new body, and not a body of flesh and blood.

However, we need to be aware that heaven will be far more than a private family reunion.

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked by a group of pastors' wives: "*Will we see our loved ones on the other side?*" "*Yes, but with others too*".

This will be the greatest re-union of all time – indeed, it will be an international gathered – with people from "*every tribe, nation and race*" (Rev 5.9)

Here again is cause for us not to be sad

5. REJOICING – The joy of the Christian hope

"And so we will always be with the Lord" (v17).

This is the climax to Paul's vision of the future, and it contains the heart of the Christian hope. By comparison, all the other details are of no importance.

As Paul makes clear toward the end of his letter, to be with the Lord is to experience salvation from the wrath of God (5.9-10).

There in the presence of the Lord we are beyond the reach of evil, pain and suffering.

It is this new quality of life – life with God – which makes the thought of it being 'forever' (**always**) so desirable.

If all that God has to offer was more of the same, then I am not so sure that I would want to live forever. Let's face it, life is not always a bundle of laughs. And it's not just people outside the church who can make life such a pain – it can also be people inside the church too. But it's not more of the same. It is life lived in the presence of God – a life where, says Paul to the church at Corinth, "**God will rule completely over all**" (1 Cor 15.24). Nothing more wonderful can be imagined.

Here is cause for us to rejoice in the midst of sadness.

The thought of our salvation and indeed the salvation of our loved ones, enables us to "**rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express**" (1 Pet 1.8).

"So then encourage one another with these words" (v18: see also 5.13)

[Do notice, these words are not addressed to the leaders of the church at Thessalonica but to the church in general]. For, as the French philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote: "*Without Jesus death is horrible, but with Jesus it is holy, kind, and the joy of the true believer*"