**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

**Preparing for Advent**

Today, we enter the season of Advent, which is the season leading up to Christmas. It’s a season of waiting: where we think about the wait for the birth of the Messiah at Christmas but also think about the waiting season in which we currently live, waiting for the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time.

When will Jesus return? How will Jesus return? We don’t know the details, of course, and we want to avoid falling into conjecture and speculation because that’s a waste of our time. But there is comment on this event in the Bible and on this Advent Sunday, it’s a good time for us to think a bit about this.

And there’s two questions I want us to think about this morning from this passage that we’ve heard read from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, and the two questions are these: Firstly, what happens to those people who have died before Jesus returns? Secondly, what can we actually *know* about the return of Jesus at the end of time?

These are the same questions that the church in Thessalonica were asking themselves, so they sought wisdom from Paul the Apostle and wrote him a letter asking him about these issues and what we have heard this morning is Paul’s reply to them.

It seems that the Thessalonians were concerned about their friends and relatives who had died and were unsure about what had happened to them and what the process is, as it were, following death and before the Second Coming. So they were looking for assurances in this regard, which Paul gives them here.

And so we begin at verse 13: “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.”

Now there’s something to be said here about grief that I shouldn’t really need to say but, from some negative experiences I’ve had in the past, I think I need to briefly address it. And the point is this: Paul is not saying that grief and mourning are wrong.

Now, I say that because, on more than a few occasions, I have come across Christians who, in the face of bereavement and loss have behaved in such a way as to just celebrate the fact that their loved one is with God and they have behaved as if there is nothing to grieve and there is no sense of loss. And if they are with people who are grieving, they have intimated that this is a sign of spiritual weakness and lack of faith. I experienced that when my first wife died of cancer and certain Christians I knew would say things like, “Why are you crying? She is with the Lord now – that’s wonderful news!” Really unhelpful and deeply unpastoral…

Well, of course we do have the hope as Christians that death isn’t the end but that is absolutely no reason to deny the entirely human need to grieve and mourn when we lose someone we love. After all, even Jesus mourned and wept at the loss of his friend Lazarus.

In this passage, Paul does not prohibit grief – he wants us to avoid hopeless grief, which is altogether different. “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.” He does not say, “We do not want you to grieve…” but “We do not want you to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope” - and that is the difference the Christian faith can bring.

A couple of years ago, I went to a humanist funeral and whilst it was a real celebration of the person’s life, there was absolutely no sense of hope for the future and that was really noticeable in the way the funeral was done. But as Christians, we do have hope: we have the hope of eternal life in the loving arms of God, however we might picture that to be.

It is not pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking, of course, but hope that has real substance, based on the historical truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And so Paul tells us that it is OK to grieve and mourn when we lose someone we love. But our mourning and our grief is held in the context of the hope we have that death isn’t the end and that God’s love and care transcends time and space, transcends even life and death and that his love and care are constant for us throughout all things.

And the way to have hope in the midst of loss, of course, is by holding fast to the knowledge of the historical reality of the resurrection, which is why, in this verse, Paul says that he doesn’t want us to be ignorant.

For Paul, there is a link between ignorance and hopeless grief.

But we notice, too, that Paul uses a metaphor here for death: he talks about those who have ‘fallen asleep’. Three times he uses this phrase – in verses, 13, 14, and 15. But why does he use this metaphor? There are three possible reasons, and the truth is probably an amalgamation of all three.

First, in many ancient cultures, the stillness of the body in death led to the analogy with falling asleep.

Second, in the Old Testament, there was the idea that death was the period of rest after labour. So we come across the idea that the patriarchs and kings ‘slept with their fathers’.

But thirdly, there is the idea contained here, I think, that death is only a temporary state and that, just as sleep is followed by waking, so death is followed by resurrection. This idea is found in Daniel 12:2: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” And, of course, Jesus drew on this idea in John 11:11 with regard to Lazarus: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up”. Interestingly, the English word ‘cemetery’ is taken from the Greek ‘koimeterion’, which means ‘a sleeping place’.

So, even in the use of the analogy ‘fallen asleep’, Paul is proposing that hope is not misguided because death is not the end.

And in verse 14, Paul makes a clear link between the hope we have and the ministry of Jesus: “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”.

And so begins this section of Paul’s letter that deals with the Second Coming of Jesus.

What I want to do is outline the teaching and then give a couple of possible interpretations, because we are inevitably left with the question to ask whether or not this is a literal teaching about how the Second Coming will happen or whether this is metaphorical language. Both of these positions accept the reality of the Second Coming: the question is whether Paul intends for us to believe that how he describes the event is how it will actually take place.

The Greek word that Paul uses here to announce the second coming of Jesus is ‘parousia’ - and there are two possible interpretations of this word.

First, it can describe a physical visit from a person of high rank: so, if Queen Elizabeth, or the Prime Minister or even the Bishop of London came to visit us, we could describe it as a ‘parousia’.

Secondly, the term can be used to describe how a hidden divine power makes his presence felt by a revelation of his power. So perhaps we could say that a healing is a ‘parousia’ or a community transformed by many people coming to faith is a ‘parousia’. The second translation does not necessarily entail a physical visit as such but is a revelation of divine power in a non-physical way.

So when Paul uses this word of what we call the second coming of Jesus, it could mean a physical return or it could mean a demonstration of his power in another way.

In verse 15, Paul has an important point to make: “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the parousia of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” I think the point of Paul’s teaching in this verse is to give the Thessalonian Christians absolute assurance that there will be no separation at the parousia of Christ. The dead will be with him, the living with be with him and the dead and the living with be with each other. There would be no sense of precedence for either the living or the dead but all will be with Jesus in that great event together.

He is offering assurance and hope to new Christians unsure of how things will be and is attempting to calm their troubled spirits to assure us that, after death, we will be reunited with all those we have loved within the presence of our loving God.

And Paul then moves on in verses 16 & 17 to make four affirmations about the parousia of Christ: “For the Lord 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 for ever.”

First, the parousia will involve Christ himself: it is Jesus who will return.

Second, the parousia will be accompanied by the rising of the dead: Christ and his people belong together – now and for all eternity.

Third, those who are still alive will be caught up with Christ.

Again, Paul is re-iterating here that both the living and the dead belong eternally with each other and with their Lord and that there will never be a moment of separation in Christ.

And then finally, to really drive that point home, Paul says in the second part of verse 17 that “we will be with the Lord for ever”. Again, no separation between the living, the dead and the Lord.

So, the key thing we need to remember about the return of Jesus at the end of time is that there will never be any separation from God and we will be reunited with those we love, for all eternity.

But we are left with the question as to whether this is a literal description by Paul about how the parousia of Christ will actually happen.

There are many Christians who believe that this is a literal description: that it describes the return of Christ from heaven to earth, that will be accompanied by the sound of a trumpet and the call of an archangel, that the dead will rise and that living Christians will be physically lifted up into the air where we will join with Christ and be transported together to heaven. That is a classic understanding of this passage and who am I to say whether it is right or wrong?

There are many Christians who take an alternative view and understand this passage to be a metaphorical description of the parousia of Christ which, as we know by the original meaning of the word ‘parousia’ may not involve a physical return of Jesus but a revelation of his divine power.

So for some, this is a literal description of what will happen at the Second Coming of Christ. For others, it is a metaphor of parousia; a statement of Christ’s Lordship over all creation. Either one of these interpretations has merit and neither is without reason. Perhaps we just need to make something of a decision for ourselves and show respect for those who take a different viewpoint on what is, after all, a very ambiguous piece of teaching.

But we must not lose the pastoral intent of what Paul is saying: his purpose in writing what he did was not to give a definitive blow by blow account of the events of the parousia – literal or not - but to encourage the Thessalonians in their anxiety about what has happened to their dead relatives and that intent is shown in the last verse of Chapter 4: “Therefore encourage each other with these words”.

So this Advent season, as we think about waiting for Jesus, we can do so in the assurance and firm hope that, one day, in whatever way, we will be fully reunited with God and fully reunited with those we love who have already died. That, in itself, is a real cause for celebration and comfort and we thank God for the hope he has given us that, in due course, all things will be reunited in him.