

Scripture Reading for November 8th 2020

Wisdom (of Solomon) 6:12-13,17-20 (NRSV)

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.

¹³ She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.

The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction,
and concern for instruction is love of her,

¹⁸ and love of her is the keeping of her laws,

and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality,

¹⁹ and immortality brings one near to God;

²⁰ so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.

1 Thess 4:13-18 (NIV)

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Sermon: Waiting, Trusting, and Living in Hope

What happens when we die? That's a good question, particularly on Remembrance Day and at funerals. You probably all have your own views on that matter. Many people believe that when you are dead, that it; your existence is over, and you only live on in the memory of loved ones. We become merely "Dust in the Wind," as the group Kansas sang.¹ Others believe in some kind of afterlife but are not really sure what that might look like. Some believe in reincarnation, others that we become angels or stars. Still others are convinced of the Greek idea of "the immortality of the soul" and hence the persistence of a non-physical entity after we die. Perhaps what fuels all such thinking is an earnest desire for *hope*, that our human existence is much *more* than the proverbial "three-score-years-and-ten." But a skeptic could legitimately ask, "What is the *basis* of your hope?" A meaningful response has to be more than wishful thinking at a time of grief.

Paul responds to this question in his pastoral letter to the church in Thessalonica, (in Greece). This is one of the earliest New Testament documents, likely *the* earliest, and was written about 50 AD – well *before* the Gospels. Some of the Christians in Thessalonica had died and this seemed to be creating anxiety for some reason. It may be because they were influenced by those promoting other philosophies that denied the possibility of the resurrection. It could be that this community didn't expect *anyone* to die before the return of Jesus and, consequently, were concerned that those who had already died would not be present when Christ comes and so be disadvantaged.

Paul is therefore concerned that they learn appropriate Christian grief, instead of the hopeless mourning that typified Greco-Roman funerals.² Archeologists have found a Latin tomb inscription that reads "I was not, I was, I am not, I care not," a saying from Epicurean philosophy, which is analogous to atheism. In contrast to that, Paul wants to instill Christian *hope*. He begins by reminding them of what seems to be an early creedal statement: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again."³ That is the basis of the Christian hope; the Creator God raised Jesus from the dead. But more than that, the resurrection of Jesus is *not* to be viewed as an isolated event. Implicit here is that those who believe that Jesus died and rose again also believe that he will *return*.⁴ That's because the resurrection is directly connected with God's final triumph over all that is evil, including death itself. Notice that Paul doesn't exactly say *where* the dead are now, or what state they are in. It is enough to know that they are in God's care, and that, when Jesus appears again, they will too. More importantly, those who remain alive "in Christ" when he comes will *not* have precedence over those who had died. There is no advantage for those

¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSs4jK6aicl> .

² See 1 Thess 4:13.

³ 1 Thess 4:14a. The language of "rose," rather than "was raised" (by God), which is Paul's customary language – see Rom 4:24–25; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:4; 2 Cor 1:9 – suggests that this was a familiar creedal statement of which Paul reminds them.

⁴ This is implicit in this section though the Greek (and apocalyptic imagery) is tortuous in 1 Thess 4:14-17. Moreover, we cannot read this letter without taking seriously Paul's general conviction of Christ "coming," (Greek: *Parousia*); see: 1 Thess 1:10; 2:12; 3:13.

who remain alive, and there's no disadvantage for those who have died.⁵ The observant amongst you may have noticed that Paul included himself as being alive when Jesus comes,⁶ suggesting that he thought the Lord was coming soon. However, in his later writings, Paul seems to reflect on the possibility of his own death.⁷

What *words* can we use to describe such future events? Can we meaningfully explain the color red to someone born blind, or the sound of birdsong to some born deaf? We can try, but our analogies will be very limited, and we can't really understand how our descriptions will be imagined by the recipient. Hear again what Paul says: "*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.*"⁸ What on earth is he trying to say?!

At the outset, we must recognize that Paul is using dramatic, *apocalyptic* language; it is *poetic* rather than literal. If we make that basic category mistake, we will only add greater confusion to our anxiety. But that *doesn't* mean we shouldn't take what he has to say seriously. Using such language, Paul says that one day God will act decisively and with power. A herald's call and a loud trumpet fanfare typically announce the arrival of a ruler or a royal figure,⁹ his readers would understand that. The risen Jesus will come, then, just like a ruler who comes on a state visit to see his colony. And when that happened in those days, citizens *wouldn't* wait for the ruler to turn up at the city gates; that would be rude! No, they would leave the city and go to welcome the dignitary along the way and then accompany him back in celebration. That is the picture Paul is painting for them. I'll now expand and explain this image.

When Paul talks of Jesus "descending," he doesn't literally suppose that Jesus is physically located "up" there at the moment. He is alluding to the book of Daniel, where the writer says: "In my *vision* at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."¹⁰ Clouds often signified the presence of God, as in the accounts of Moses receiving the 10 Commandments and the Transfiguration of Jesus.¹¹ The reference to Son of Man - who the Gospels identify as Jesus - speaks of *God's* special representative who has divine authority to do what he does. "Heaven," where Jesus is at the moment, isn't in another *location* within our space, but in another *dimension*. As a physicist, I love that language and the image it conjures up in my imagination. In fact, in Colossians, the writer - quite possibly Paul himself - simply speaks of Jesus "appearing,"¹² rather than "descending." What for

⁵ 1 Thess 4:15. In contrast to what he writes later in Phil 2:23 and 2 Cor 5:1-9, Paul does *not* say that the dead are *already* with Christ. Notice too that Paul prefaces this with the phrase: "We declare to you by the word of the Lord. . ." This likely does not mean that this links to a specific teaching of Jesus, rather, this is Spirit-inspired thinking to an authorized *apostle*.

⁶ See 1 Thess 4:15 (and 1 Cor 15:51-52). Consider too Mark 9:1.

⁷ See 2 Cor 5:1-5; Phil 1:20-23.

⁸ 1 Thess 4:16-17.

⁹ See Isa 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zech 9:14; Rev 1:10; 14:2; 19:6; 2 Esdras 6:23.

¹⁰ Dan 7:13.

¹¹ See Exod 24:15-18; Mark 9:2-8; Matt 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36.

¹² See Col 3:4.

us is a confusing reference to “descending” shows that it is a risky metaphor. But all metaphors are risky when talking about the unknown, including the future. So instead of focusing on the *direction* Jesus comes from, we are to simply note that he comes *from God* as his *authorized* agent in history. Again: the mention of “clouds” is *not* a reference to *where* Jesus physically will come from, but to *who* sends him – namely, God!

Jesus has been given power over death and, when he comes, those “in Christ” will rise first, says Paul. If we are united with Jesus in this life,¹³ then we will rise to be with him when he comes.¹⁴ *That* is the source of our hope for those who have died. We are then told that those who are still alive,¹⁵ “will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”¹⁶ First, Paul uses the language of “Lord” and this has implications of one who has supreme authority. To a Roman, that would mean Caesar; to a Jew, it is a name for God himself. This language is consistent with someone worthy of a royal fanfare. This “meeting the Lord” in the air is *not* literalistic rapture terminology. Alas this wording has had huge influence in some Christian circles, with people being suddenly “snatched”¹⁷ out of their homes, jobs, cars, and airplanes, leaving the rest of humankind suddenly bereft and in a state of fearful chaos. This is a huge mistake, as I said before, because it makes visionary language literal. The pastoral point of this letter is to instill comfort and hope, not terror!

The key point is that Jesus comes from *God’s* dimension, and both ours and God’s will be joined at last in the new creation – when heaven and earth are united. This, ultimately, is *God’s* doing and in his timing. And whether we are alive or dead when Jesus comes, it makes no difference, we will be in our Lord’s *presence* forever – and that’s also signified in that language of “clouds.” We will not literally be floating “in the air”! Rather, where the risen Jesus is, we will be also.

Paul concludes, “Encourage one another with these words.”¹⁸ I believe these *are* wonderful words of hope for those suffering hardships - as the Christians in Thessalonica were - and waiting for God’s vindication. Paul’s approach here is to place the stories that of those who have died within the context of what God is doing in the world. Their stories – and ours - have meaning because they are part of God’s bigger story. Death is *not* the final enemy. The resurrection of Jesus shows that God has already begun to triumph and will ultimately prevail - and that makes our grief more bearable. Of course, Paul doesn’t answer the many questions we have, but simply specifies our grounds for hope. Indeed, it’s not even Paul’s last word on this topic; he says more about this in 1 Corinthians 15, and I have preached on

¹³ Traditionally signified in baptism.

¹⁴ Paul does not say here what happens to those who are *not* “in Christ.” (That is not at issue in this pastoral letter.)

¹⁵ And at that time, Paul thought he would be one of them; see [6].

¹⁶ 1 Thess 4:17.

¹⁷ It is true that the Greek word for “caught up” is powerful – “snatched” is not inappropriate.

¹⁸ 1 Thess 4:18.

that before.¹⁹ The point here is that we can be confident in God’s future purposes for those Christians who have died. Yes, we will naturally experience grief, but there is also *hope*. There will come a day when God will put all wrongs to right, when sadness will turn to joy, when those who have died “in Christ” will be reunited with those still alive. Jesus will be central to that day, which will end with the unveiling of God’s presence in the world. At that time, those who have already died and those who are still alive will *both* be given renewed bodies to serve God joyfully in his new creation. This image is not meant to be wishful thinking, or to minimize our grief, but to reframe our sorrow in the wider context that God intends. And because the recipients of Paul’s letter were part of a *community*, he wants them to encourage each other with those words.

I believe those words are still relevant for us today, Remembrance Day, as we continue waiting, trusting, and living in hope. What is the basis of our hope? We must go back to that creed Paul mentioned: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again.”²⁰ That is why the resurrection of Jesus is so pivotal to our faith.²¹ But let us *not* stop there. Let us live “in Christ” confidently and without fear, in the sure knowledge that Jesus “*will come again to judge the living and the dead,*”²² as it says in both the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds, and therefore encourage each other in that hope. Amen.

¹⁹ See: <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/If-Christ-Has-Not-Been-Raised.pdf> ; <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Transformed-Bodies.pdf> .

²⁰ 1 Thess 4:14a.

²¹ Paul acknowledges this in 1 Cor 15:16-19.

²² “Judgement” is not to be seen as negative or a cause of fear, rather it means God will put *wrongs to right* – i.e., “judge.”