
Sunday 8th November – The third Sunday before Advent

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 & Matthew 25:1-13

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Believers who have died

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. 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. 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 for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Matthew 25:1-13

The parable of the ten virgins

'At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

'At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

'Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out."

"No," they replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves."

'But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

'Later the others also came. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us!"

‘But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”

‘Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Reflection

Today on Remembrance Sunday, as we commemorate all those who have died in conflicts past and present, our reading from 1 Thessalonians 4 seems especially appropriate; “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!” Paul’s words are first a challenge. Our faith in Jesus should make a noticeable difference that distinguishes us from those who do not believe; especially when it comes to suffering and death. But Paul’s words are also an encouragement as Paul reminds us that we have solid grounds for our hope in Jesus.

Incidentally, Paul doesn’t tell the church not to grieve! Being a Christian does not mean we live in “La La Land,” immune from pain and suffering. Nor does it mean we have to pretend all is well, when it is not. But, Paul argues, as Christians we do not need to despair. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, one day we too will rise; 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

This is the message of the Gospel and the foundation of all of Paul’s teaching. Christ is alive. This gives meaning and purpose to everything; without this our faith is futile. Jesus’ resurrection means we can be confident we too will be raised. Paul states this more fully in 1 Corinthians 15. But there is more! Our hope is fixed not just on Christ’s death and resurrection, but on the promise that one day Jesus will return to reign over his kingdom as our victorious conquering King.

The Thessalonians believed this; 1 Thessalonians 1:9 describes how they were waiting for Jesus to rescue them “from the coming wrath.” Maybe their suffering had ground them down; and as they watched their friends die, their faith had been shaken. Paul now reminds them that the story isn’t over. There is going to be an exciting finale! And every follower of Jesus, both those who are alive, as well as those who have already died in the faith, will be included. 1 Thessalonians 4:16: “The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command...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.”

Over the years these verses have been greatly misunderstood to mean all we have to do, is hold on for as long as possible, until we are “airlifted” out of trouble, leaving the world’s sorry mess behind. And how this must have been what the

soldiers who were fighting in the trenches longed for. A way out of the mess. In my teens, I had double bass lessons with a lovely old chap who had survived the Battle of the Somme. I remember how he once looked out at his garden and pointed to some daffodils which were no more than a few yards away. He told me how he and his men went “over the top” and by the time they got as far as the daffodils, three quarters of them were either dead or dying. The daffodils shone like gold in the afternoon sun. It was hard to reconcile their beauty with the horror of what he had described. I’ve never forgotten it.

Escape may sound attractive, but this isn’t God’s plan! Just as Jesus came to live on earth 2000 years ago, God’s story will end with Jesus’ return – this time, to be with us forever! And we are to be ready to meet him; not escape with him! The language Paul uses is of a Roman emperor visiting one of his distant colonies; arriving with appropriate pomp and ceremony (archangel and trumpet call in Jesus’ case!) The whole town would have been on alert, looking for signs of his arrival, so they could go out to honour him before bringing him back into the city. No one expected the Emperor to take his citizens back to Rome with him! Instead, his visit brought Rome’s honour and dignity to them! Just as Jesus’ coming will bring Heaven’s glory to us.

The Roman emperor would use his visit to put right any injustice, to judge over disputes and restore order; to make things just as they should be. Unfortunately, once the emperor left, things would begin to slip again. In contrast, Jesus will return and restore all things and then stay with us forever to rule over a renewed heaven and a renewed earth. 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

So may God restore you and fill you with hope as you trust in him; and may we all be ready for the Bridegroom, Jesus, when he comes! Amen

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