



I Thessalonians 4.13-18
Matthew 25.1-13
8th November 2020

On 'Being with the Lord'

After losing his wife Joy, C.S.Lewis, the Oxbridge professor who could also write children's books like the Chronicles of Narnia, summed up his bereavement saying: *I never knew that grief felt so much like fear.*

I suspect there was a lot of fear going around Thessalonica in AD 41, the year Paul writes his letter.

This was incredibly early in the story of the Church, indeed not only is 1 Thessalonians thought to be Paul's earliest letter, but it's also deemed to have the earliest date of writing of any book in the New Testament Canon. If they had been arranged in chronological order of when they were written, 1 Thessalonians would be on page one.

Like many of the small house churches of that first century world those who lived in this Macedonian city found faith was a costly business. Those reading Paul's words had friends who had lost their lives because of what they believed.

So Paul writes with a pastoral heart and offers them words of encouragement, even in the face of death.

Now, you might argue that because he seems to believe, as many did in that first century, that Jesus would return in his lifetime, that Paul's words on the subjects of death and heaven have become invalid, after all, didn't he get it wrong?

Yet I suspect many of us don't want to tear 1 Thessalonians 4 out of our bibles. Instead we want to look behind the poetry and get to the essence of what the imagery means.

In the end Paul seems to have died at the hands of the executioner. We have no record of his death or his mindset when it came. Yet, I would reckon he died as he lived with a deep sense of trust in the loving and living presence of God and that turned his fear to hope.

So, what to make of these verses and the truths behind the pictures?

What is it that takes away the *night-time of our fears*? What is it that soothes grief with hope?

I think for Paul it was the idea of, how does he put it: *being with the Lord*.

Recently our Baptist Regional Minister, who is suffering with blood cancer, shared with us, his colleagues, on Zoom, something of his journey since receiving his devastating diagnosis. One line struck me when he said that through all this he has felt *so loved*.

That speaks volumes about him. But I think, for Geoff, it also spoke volumes about the God he believes in. When we are *loved*, when we give love or receive it, something of the presence of God touches and kisses our lives.

Paul was very conscious that these Thessalonians were missing their friends who had been martyred for their faith. So, to reassure them he paints this picture of the dead rising first and then those still living joining them on the Lord's return.

The issue, I think, is not whether such an image is a scientific prophesy, but what it says to us today in the ebb and flow of life and death.

Paul had this idea that our grief could be soothed with hope if we were motivated by the idea that whether we live or die we are always with the Lord, we are always held in love.

Like many children I grew up adoring Christmas Eve. My grandparents had arrived and would now spend a few days with us.

As they came through the door there would be smiles, kisses and hugs – it felt as if LOVE had arrived. They were with us and the world felt softer and safer because of their presence.

When I presided over their funerals my grief was soothed by the same picture. But this time it was God, not me, who welcomed them over the threshold to a place, a state of being, in which they not only brought love but they received it as they are held in its hands, the loving hands of a welcoming God.

This is not the language of science; it is the poetry of faith. Words, ideas and longings springing from scripture and passages like this morning's as Paul writes: *Thus, we shall always be with the Lord.*

The essence of this passage, it seems to me, is the idea that the PRESENCE of God, the presence of love – sustains us in life and holds us in death.

Of course, to 21st century ears, the imagery of Thessalonians is a mish mash of ancient ideas and pictures. The writer combines symbols from the Roman, Royal and Apocalyptic traditions into a dream like sequence full of colour and drama. In today's world this could easily be turned into something like a film, deliberately scripted to be uplifting and inspirational and no doubt that was, in essence, Paul's original intention. He wanted to urge these disciples to keep going and live out the risky business of faith.

In that Early Church world two views of the so called Second Coming of Jesus did the rounds.

In pondering what to do with the time lag between these two comings one group thought of the space in between as no more than a waiting room. In their minds, because Jesus' return was thought to be imminent, they settled to nothing, even becoming well known for being lazy.

Paul deplored that way of thinking because for him the time gap between the first and second comings was a time of grace. This was the moment to share Good News, to live faithfully and grow in

love.

All of this might be costly yet it was also full of joy because something of the hope of heaven was being experienced here and now in the everyday of an earthly life.

Perhaps it's a truism that any generation can feel a sense of despair about the future. Living as a Macedonian first century Christian was tough and there must have been days when many at the church in Thessalonica felt defeated by the authorities. We live in days when many people tell me they have simply stopped turning on the news because they are can no longer cope with so much national negativity. And how must it have felt for those we are remembering today, who fought in Flanders or Dunkirk at times when it seemed as if the world was facing near total oblivion?

None of us want a Pollyanna faith looking at the world through rose tinted glasses, but neither can we survive or thrive if nothing is before us but defeat, despair and oblivion.

So, into the reality of life, life that is risky and challenging St Paul speaks to us this morning.

The dates and details of what he says are not what counts. Some have spent too many fruitless hours trying to make the poetry of this literature into a hard and fast science.

As one commentator I read this week has said, in passages like today's with so many details actually just one detail is important: God...and his nature.

That's the essence of what Paul is saying here and we need to hear it in our day and situations too.

Whatever we are going through, whatever is before us God is with us. His love enfolds us, his strength enables us, his hope inspires us.

Today's reading ends with a profoundly significant phrase that can

become for us a deeply reassuring tenet of faith: *Thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

God's presence, it soothes our grief and brings joy, strength and hope. That is what happens when Jesus returns everyday into our lives.

May it be so, in the name of the One whose presence blesses us every day. Amen

Ian Green, 4th November 2020, Amersham