

Hardest Part of the Job

- Certainly when I started in parish ministry it was one of the **hardest parts of the job**, and even after a number of years it can be very difficult:
- *picture of grieving woman, between despair and hope*
 - asked to take a **funeral**, asked to go and help people for whom the bottom has just dropped out of their world, to offer care, compassion and help in Christ's name.
- **What can anyone say?**
 - **platitudes** are seen so starkly for what they are - mere platitudes.
 - **death** is, after all, the **ultimate enemy**.
 - there's an **absolute finality** that nothing can change - medical progress has only put death off, delayed its coming, helped us enjoy life meantime.
- And yet, even when the vast majority of people in this country have turned their backs on God and his church, when we live in a predominantly secular society, the **majority of funerals are still (at least outwardly) Christian**
- Very few families indeed will not have a minister or a priest officiate
 - only those with a clear alternative allegiance: ardently atheist, or Muslim...

Why?

- Why do people still turn to the church - if not so clearly to God - in face of this ultimate crisis?
 - **because of a lingering awareness that we have hope, and a message of hope, even in the face of death**
- As Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonian church, this whole area was very much on his mind.
 - for the Thessalonians hadn't fully grasped the hope that was theirs in Jesus Christ

Thessalonian Situation

- The church was young, growing and spreading throughout the Mediterranean Basin.
- **Thessalonica** was a city in **Greece**, which Paul had visited shortly after he first arrived in Europe from Asia Minor on his second missionary journey (**Acts 17**)
 - church was planted, and started to grow
 - though faced opposition from the local Jewish synagogue.
- Paul obviously spent time **teaching them the basics**:
 - but in the limited time available, **he couldn't cover everything!**
- So, in time, once he'd moved on, he had cause to write to them:
 - **clearing up** matters he'd heard they were **struggling with**
 - and **encouraging** them to continue in the faith.

What about those who have died?

- One particular thing was on their minds.
- *picture of graveyard, "those who are asleep"*
- Most of the early Christians reckoned that **Christ's return was imminent**:
 - and that **they would therefore still be alive when it happened**.
- But after a few years, it hadn't happened:
 - and the first **members of that local church in Thessalonica died**.
- Was the **message of eternal life** then **invalid**?
- Did the **hope** they had embraced mean **nothing**?
- They had looked forward to the day when Jesus Christ would come for them...
 - **wasn't he coming?**
- And **would those who had died miss out** if or when Jesus did come back?
- And so Paul writes to them.
- His response comes in **two parts**:
 - **1. Description of what will happen at the end (4:13-5:3)**

- (Rather longer section for us)

- 2. Call to live in light of what will happen (5:4-11)

The Coming of the Lord

- Like all of the Biblical writers, Paul has to resort to **picture language** to describe events beyond full understanding.
- **picture of clouds, "Behold he comes"**
- Despite this "**indescrivability**" he manages to give us a feel for the shape of the land, a large scale map, if you like, of what lies ahead.
- v.14 - Jesus **died** - Jesus **rose** - and **like Jesus** those who have died will be **raised to new life**.
- *"We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep"*
- The picture Paul paints in the subsequent verses is a montage:
 - partly using the imagery of an important official or leader, a dignitary, entering a town
 - and partly of something far more supernatural!
 - in 1st century Greek-Roman culture, the "**done thing**" was not to wait in the city for the guest to arrive, but to **go out** into the countryside and **accompany** them in.
 - the ruler, as well as the welcoming party, would be **accompanied by his own people**, his entourage.
- So Paul pictures **those who have previously died** as **accompanying Jesus** as he arrives on earth in triumph, as he enters his "city".
- and if we are spared until he comes again, in the picture, **we will go to join the triumphal entry party**, meeting them "**in the air**" (v.17), and together form the joyful welcoming party for Jesus our Lord and King.
- (Throughout Scripture, **clouds** indicate **presence of God**, his full glory and honour, like at the transfiguration, on Mt Sinai at giving of Law, above Jesus at his baptism, ...)
- Those who have **died** and those who are **still alive** all have their place:
 - equal in importance - and **that place is with the Lord**.
- This is a picture of the true ruler returning, to oust the usurper (Satan):
 - the real thing replacing the deception
 - Jesus' **eternal** rule is replacing the **passing phase** of Satan's authority
 - and consequently giving us confidence that we shall be with Him forever

For Us?

- Obviously for the Thessalonians these were **reassuring words**:
 - their **worry** about departed friends and relatives was met with **assurance** that they would not miss out on all that Jesus had won for them, on being with him...
 - nor was the **gospel** itself **compromised** by these people dying - for **Jesus had won the victory over death**.
- But that same note of reassurance is open to us too...
 - ...we too can "**encourage one another with these words**".
- How? Why?

1. There is life after death (add text to screen)

- First, in Jesus resurrection, in his conquest of death, we see the simple truth:
 - **there is indeed life after death** - else how was he raised? (See 1 Cor 15:12-19)
 - (1 Cor 15:13) "**If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.**"
 - but Christ has been raised, and so the dead **are** raised to life again!
 - (1 Cor 15:20) *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

2. There is hope in Christ (add text to screen)

- More than merely reassurance that there is something beyond, we have clear guidance:
 - for those who have that relationship with Christ...
 - for those who "died believing in him" (v.14), for those who are his
 - **the prospect is of eternity with the King of Kings**
 - the glorious picture of his return in power and glory and majesty with his people gathered round him!
- That hope stands **against** many of the **common beliefs floating today**:
 - few actually believe there is nothing beyond death...
 - but one very common belief is in **reincarnation** - that we'll all come back again, round and round - not just weird Buddhist sects and stuff, but common on radio phone-ins, even mentioned to me during funeral visits!!
 - or, perhaps partly rooted in Christian tradition, the vain hope that loved ones who have died will be reunited with the rest of their family... regardless of their status in Christ...
- That is merely the **imaginings** of those who, in the words of v.13, "**have no hope**", and have to give themselves something to cling onto
- We, on the other hand, **have Jesus as our guide**:
 - one who has gone through death and shown us once and for all what lies ahead
- Perhaps **worth noting** before we move on that the other element in Paul's description of what lies ahead is his reminder that **we don't know when Jesus will return**.
 - remember back to the Millennium Fever there was as we approached year 2000?
 - there was an increasing attention to dates and times - fruitless!
 - after all, if we are dating the years from Jesus birth-year, we were probably already at the Millennium in 1996! (**Its reckoned a monk made a mistake of 4 years somewhere down the line - hence Jesus born in about 4BC!!**)
- Regardless, trying to predict date is pointless!
- Rather, Paul encourages the Thessalonians, and with them ourselves, towards **a hope based on knowledge**:
 - a realistic hope, not one blind in the face of tragedy, but conscious of God's hand on us and those we love
- We **grieve**, yes, for **death still hurts**, it still separates...
 - but we do not grieve **as the rest of the world grieves**, that has no hope
 - for we have a warm hope, **an expectation of reunion**, of rejoicing in the renewed company of friends and family who also know the Lord
 - **and in the surpassing joy and glory of Christ's own presence.**

Miss Isobel Anderson's Funeral

- I well remember one of the **first funerals I attended**:
 - it was in the town where I grew up
 - the lady who had died had lived there all her life, and was **well known locally** - a primary teacher, involved with the local gala day, and if you needed to know who was related to who...!
- She was also a **Christian**, one whose faith spilled over into every aspect of her life
 - there was sadness that day - family - friends - **but also celebration!**
 - it was the first time I'd ever "**felt**" the difference true faith makes in the face of death!
- For she had **gone home** to be with her Lord:
 - **she will never, ever be separated from his presence**
 - and we who share her faith will meet her when Jesus comes again!
- **Perhaps we too can remember a Christian funeral we have attended which has been shot through with hope?**

Live in Light of His Return

- *picture of couple facing the future*
- So, our confidence in Christ's **resurrection** and in the **prospect of his return** gives us confidence to face whatever life brings, **even death itself**.
- But Paul says more than that:
 - *(and its a thought echoed by other NT writers (eg 1 John 3, etc))*
 - our hope for the future, our confidence in Christ's return and our resurrection with transformed bodies...
 - all of those things don't just affect the **hope** we bring to bear on the **future**
 - but also the **way we live our lives day by day**.
- **v.4ff** - Paul pictures us as those who live in the light - **we can see clearly**
 - and so should live lives worthy of that calling
- He makes an association between our **future destiny** and our **current situation**.
 - his thrust is that, as watchmen on the city wall need to be alert, ready, doing their job to spot the dignitary coming and so greet him properly
 - we too need to be ready, doing our job, staying alert.
- Living in light of our citizenship - **we are citizens of heaven, not yet gone home**.
 - behave as citizens of heaven, not adopting standards of our current host!
- That has a **huge wide range of implications**:
 - touches on every area of our lives!
 - our character (**love, joy, peace...**), our actions, our morality, our standards, our priorities...
 - all of these need to be lived in light of heaven.
- *"If I am going to spend eternity with Jesus Christ, in the presence of purity and awesome holiness as well as of gladness and joy and creativity, and if already I am an ambassador for that heavenly kingdom here, how does that affect the way I live now?"*

Conclusion

- Yet even as Paul exhorts and challenges the Thessalonians to live in light of the implication of Jesus' resurrection, in the expectation of his return, he returns to his first focus:
 - **to reassure them and encourage them in the face of death (v.11)**
- And that's where we too should conclude:
 - not merely with the challenge to live in light of our citizenship in heaven in our ears
 - but with a powerful and vivid vision of the glorious prospect of Jesus' return
 - of the **life with himself** he promises us in these verses
 - of the **character of that life**, transformed as Jesus was on his resurrection
 - of the **reunion with family and friends** who have, in the Lord, gone before
- All of that is a joyful and a glorious prospect.
 - its **not** one that **removes grief, that ignores sorrow**
 - but **it** is one gives us **hope** and **encourages** us to renewed **faithfulness and delight in the fore-taste of heaven** in Christ's presence with us in the Spirit.
- **May God indeed grant us a vision of himself as we place our trust and hope in him.**