

\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be ignorant about those who have died. We don't want you to grieve like other people who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> We believe that Jesus died and came back to life. We also believe that, through Jesus, God will bring back those who have died. They will come back with Jesus. <sup>15</sup> We are telling you what the Lord taught. We who are still alive when the Lord comes will not go into His kingdom ahead of those who have already died. <sup>16</sup> The Lord will come from heaven with a command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the dead who believed in Christ will come back to life. <sup>17</sup> Then, together with them, we who are still alive will be taken in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. In this way we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> So then, comfort each other with these words!

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (GW)

\*\*\*\*\*

In our First Reading this day (Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25) we hear the account of Joshua assembling the people of Israel at Shechem, after the conquest of the land, and at the site of Abram's covenant (cf. Genesis 12). Here Joshua calls the people to reaffirm their commitment to the Lord. But this is a fascinating encounter at many levels. Joshua said the people should 'put away your foreign gods' (as Jacob had once instructed his household: Gen. 35:2). This implies they still had their 'foreign gods' with them! Joshua could almost 'see' people 'falling away' (just as we 'see' people enamoured by their sport, or fishing, or work, or family, or so many other things – all good things in themselves, but how easy it is to be distracted from looking at God's way for us).

Imagine this event. Joshua here is very old – around 110 years old! He is with people he had known all his life: warriors he had fought with, families who had laughed and cried together, those who had lost family in war, the young who could see only a 'bright future ahead', and so many other people. But Joshua's time in this earth was drawing to an end, and he was concerned for the people's future. (Does that sound familiar to us today...?)

As we draw to the end of another church year there are some key themes that emerge that relate to 'the future'. One theme has to do with the judgement on the last day (together with Christ's return). We know that there are many people and groups who like to speak about this, and even make predictions about when this will be. The other theme that emerges as our church year draws to its close has to do with our own mortality – and the fact that one day we will die.

For many people, themes of 'judgement on the last day', together with 'death and dying', can be frightening topics. For those who have seen death, especially those who have experienced death in terrible accidents or violent crime, death can be a terrifying topic. Maybe it is because of a fear of death that we avoid talking about death, especially with our friends and family.

In the Thessalonian congregation, the question about ‘the future’, especially in relation to ‘death and dying’ had been a hot topic of dispute. There were those who thought Christ’s second coming would be very soon – and that God’s people would not die before Jesus’ return. This had not meant that the people had given up on the faith; but they had questions about the faith.

In response to reports Paul had heard from Timothy – that the Thessalonians had kept their faith despite facing persecution (3:1-10) – Paul had written to the Christian at Thessalonica to address their concerns.

In our Bible Reading today we hear Paul say (1 Thess.4:16): “*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.*” When you try to imagine this, this is an extraordinary statement. Paul paints a picture of Christ returning with a loud shout, an archangel’s call, and a trumpet sound. This is an evocative image, and Paul would have been aware he was using this imagery. In Bible time, trumpets accompanied important events, especially festivals. Trumpets were the noise that announced to people that things were happening. And by using this imagery, Paul is underlining that ultimately Christ will come to receive and care for his own. We may worry about ‘the future’, but Jesus is our future.

But this didn’t answer everyone’s question. There were still questions about: What happens when we die? This was a real question for the Thessalonians in those early years of Christianity. And their thoughts were something like a bride-to-be who is devastated that Grandma died just days before the wedding. The Thessalonian Christians were concerned that believers who had already died were going to miss out on the glories of Christ’s triumphant return. Not so, explained Paul. “*Brothers and sisters in Jesus: we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like others do who have no hope. 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*” (1 Thess. 4:13, 14). Christians who have died are not going to miss out on Christ’s triumphant return. On the contrary, they are going to have a front row seat for it.

Death for a Christian means falling asleep in the arms of Jesus. Children aren’t afraid to fall asleep in the arms of their parents are they? No. They prefer it. And why shouldn’t they? In their parents’ arms they find warmth and protection. In the same way a Christian doesn’t need to be afraid of dying because it’s like falling asleep in Dad’s arms at Grandma’s and then waking up in your warm comfy bed at home.

Our hope, then, is Jesus. This is a hope that is not a generalized or ethereal hope, but a concrete hope grounded in the very resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is a hope that is not simply a future wish, but one that lays claim on life now, that makes a difference for how life is lived. In fact, it is hope that distinguishes believers from others. Paul describes the basis of this hope – that Jesus died and rose again (4:14).

One writer has said, "I knew that the resurrection had a historical, theoretical side, but I wasn't fully aware of its practical power. I had much to learn about applying Jesus' resurrection to my daily life."

So, what does this mean for us? Here I wish to propose three things ways the resurrection of Jesus will impact our lives...

First of all, Jesus died and rose for me – so how will we live for Him? One Christian speaker has said of Christians: "The world is watching you." If Jesus gives us new life, what life shall we live? And within his letter to the Thessalonians Paul suggests a number of things:

First, we may live a life of thanking God (1 Thes.1:3: *"We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*)

Second, we may live in such a way to please God, that is, in a God-pleasing manner in thought, word and deed. (1 Thess.4:4: *"Each of you should learn to control your own body."*)

Third, we are to listen to God's word. (1 Thess.4:8: *"Anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you His Holy Spirit."*)

Fourth, we are to love one another in practical, peace-filled ways. 1 Thess.4:9-11: *"Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you."*

In other words, the Object of our hope will dictate our pattern of life.

But there is a second way the resurrection of Jesus will affect our lives is in the attitudes we may have when we face many challenges of life. We all experience pain, suffering, illness, conflict, death. And of this, one writer has said, "Life is hard, but very beautiful." I like this description at two levels. First, it points us to a deeper beauty that we often miss in life. And when we miss that beauty we may sometimes struggle to cope in 'difficult times'.

Sometimes can focus on the 'beautiful' (that is, we may put on a brave face, an artificial smile, a false hope etc). It is good to have the beauty and happiness, but this is to be grounded in a reality. However, sometimes we may so focus on the 'hard' that we forget the beauty of the Lord. In this regard I like what one person once said in a devotional: *Sometimes we must be hurt in order to grow; fail in order to know; love in order to gain; sometimes we have to be broken so we can be whole again*" And this our Lord did on the cross.

Finally, and most obviously, the resurrection of Jesus will affect our hope in the face of death. God's gospel message is direct, "Jesus lived and died and rose again." This message brings to all who believe eternal life.

This truth reminds us that our earthly death is definitely not the end. The end of our earthly life is the beginning our eternal life with Jesus. Believers fall asleep in Jesus. We are comfortably carried by the arms of Jesus to heaven itself. Jesus went to the house of Mary and Martha to raise Lazarus from the dead. *"Jesus said to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"* (Jn.11:25, 26). Martha and Mary believed Jesus. We believe Jesus' resurrection provides ours. This is the main point and we dare not lose sight of this. In all this, we are to focus on Jesus.....

It is sometimes said, "Ignorance is bliss", but whoever said this wasn't standing at the grave of a loved one at the time. What you don't know about death and dying will hurt you. It can cause unnecessary grief. The Thessalonians had questions about death and dying, and ignorance would not help. The Apostle responded that in life or in death we belong to the Lord. Such are the eternal words of our Lord and Saviour.

So take to heart what the Holy Spirit has said through the Apostle Paul. "I do not want you to be ignorant concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." In life and death, in times of difficulty and uncertainty, in times of conflict, in times of joy and celebration of new life, indeed, in every situation of life, we have true hope in Jesus. And this hope does not mean we do not suffer loss, do not deeply miss loved ones, do not go through patches of Gethsemane, or even sit sometimes like Job. But we are able to face our pain, and that of the world, because the death AND resurrection of Jesus has changed our whole world.

Jesus Christ, who said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life"* (John 14:6), also said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live even though they die."* (John 11:25).

In life or in death we belong to the Lord. Such are the eternal words of our Lord and Saviour. May we always remind each other of the hope and peace and joy love and life (including the eternal life) we have in Jesus. Amen.