**Concern about Christ’s return** 15/10/23dkm

Read: 1Corinthians 15:35-58, 1Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Text: 1Thessalonians 4:13-18

Psalms: 56:1-4&10-13, 49:8-15, 73:21-28, 134a

Beliefs about death and the afterlife feature in most religions, and also among those who say they have no religion. I was interested to learn that Buddhism became part of the Japanese Shinto religion because the latter had little teaching about death and the afterlife. Death comes to all and is obvious to all, and most see human beings as possessing a soul as well as a body. The spirit continues after death of the body. In animistic religions, the spirits of the dead must be respected and appeased. Hindus and Buddhists believe in reincarnation, the spirit of a dead person entering another person or an animal, in a cycle called ‘Samsara’. The ancient Greeks and Romans had their beliefs about death and the afterlife also. They mocked the apostle Paul when he spoke about the resurrection of Jesus while in Athens. They thought the body is gone forever but the spirit or soul ends up in some dark place. The best hope offered by the Epicureans was that the soul would perish like the body; not unlike the Hindu belief in ‘Nirvana’.

Greeks and Romans were without God and without hope (Eph 2:12). In the second century a Greek lady called Irene wrote a letter of condolence to two friends when their loved one died: ‘Against such things we can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another’. I heard similar words at a recent funeral; the celebrant said, ‘I am sorry I have no words of comfort for you’. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians saying, ‘Comfort one another with these words’. He offered comfort with words of truth and hope concerning the resurrection of ‘those who have fallen asleep’ when Jesus Christ returns.

Paul has already referred to the ‘*Parousia*’ or second coming of Christ (1:10, 2:21, 3:13). This truth was part of the gospel he preached to the Thessalonians, but something they did not understand- who does! Paul writes to answer a particular question about the *Parousia* so as to still their anxious souls. If you have questions about the return of Jesus Christ you will listen to what the apostle has to say. We have four subheadings; ‘Concern about those who have fallen asleep’, ‘Coming of the Lord’, ‘Caught up together to meet Christ’, and, ‘Comfort one another’.

**1. Concern about those who have fallen asleep**

At a Christian funeral you may well hear the words of verse 13: ‘Lest you sorrow as others who have no hope’. The ‘others’ of course, are unbelievers or pagans. Those without God have no hope beyond this life; all they know about death is what others tell them or what they imagine. They long to hear someone speak from beyond the grave (cf. Luke 16:30). You who believe in Jesus have heard such a person, namely Jesus of Nazareth. The disciples watched Jesus die on the cross and some saw him buried; all saw him after he was raised from the dead. In fact, they saw him being taken up into heaven (Acts 1:11). So if you want to hear from someone who has returned from the dead, listen to Jesus!

The funeral of a believer is very different to that of an unbeliever because of this hope believers have in Christ, the hope of the resurrection and of being with Christ in glory (Phil 1:23). We do not turn funerals into celebrations like some who are ignorant, nor do we weep and wail like others. We sorrow at the loss of a loved one but find comfort in knowing that if they believed in Jesus they are now present with the Lord. Jesus said to the thief on the cross beside him, ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43). ‘The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves until the resurrection’ (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q37). There is no such thing as purgatory or ‘soul-sleep’. The Greek word for ‘fallen asleep’ is ‘*koimeterion*’ from which we get the word ‘cemetery’ and ‘crematorium’.

Why does Paul speak of death as falling asleep (4:13)? He is writing to the ‘brethren’ so is talking about believers. He is not just using a euphemism in the way we do. When a brother in India spoke of his wife being ‘promoted to glory’ we were not quite sure what he meant. Others said their loved one had ‘expired’. This is true of course; they have taken their last breath. The breathless body looks as if it is asleep. But Paul meant the person was ‘asleep’ in contrast to being ‘dead’. Note that in the next verse Jesus died- he did not ‘fall asleep’. Jesus died bearing our sins. He died and was buried and descended into hell, as we say in the Apostle’s creed, and in the Larger Catechism Q50: ‘Christ’s humiliation after his death consisted in his body being buried and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words: he descended into hell.’ Because Jesus died and descended into hell bearing our sins, we ‘fall asleep’; our bodies rest in the grave until the resurrection, when our soul is united with our risen but changed physical body (1Cor 15: 44, 53).

**2. Coming of the Lord**

In the gathering of professors, philosophers, and politicians in Athens, the apostle Paul spoke of Jesus and the resurrection. He spoke of Jesus, who died on the cross, as the judge of the world because God raised him from the dead. There is no gospel, no good news, without the resurrection of Jesus. The Thessalonians heard this gospel, the same gospel we hear today, and they believed that Jesus died and rose again (4:14). The resurrection of Jesus assures us that his sacrifice for our sins was accepted by God, and that death was defeated, not only the death of Jesus but our death (1Cor 15:54).

Death came as God’s punishment for sin, so with Jesus taking the punishment for our sin we are victorious over death; we ‘fall asleep’ rather than die. Our bodies end up in the grave but like Jesus we will be raised. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead: ‘God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus’ (4:14, Col 1:18). Jesus is risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. When he comes again, as he certainly will, he will bring with him ‘those who sleep in Jesus’ or those who have died in Christ. He will bring their souls to be united with their resurrected bodies on this great day of Christ’s return.

**3. Caught up together**

The picture of being ‘caught up’ in the air, or ‘*rapture*’ in Latin, is one you will find referred to in many books on theology and what is called ‘eschatology’ or doctrine of the last things. The apostle Paul was writing to the Thessalonians concerning their lack of knowledge regarding those who have ‘fallen asleep’, and what place they will have in the return of Jesus. Paul assures them ‘by the word of the Lord’ that we who are alive at the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep (4:15). Paul had taught them that Jesus was coming again, and they seemed to have expected this to be soon, just as we do! The return of Jesus is the next event in the Biblical timeline.

What do we understand when Paul says, ‘by the word of the Lord’ in verse 15? He speaks what is an oracle of God. Just how he received this oracle he does not say. It may have been a word spoken by Jesus but not recorded in the gospels (cf. John 20:30). Jesus does of course, speak about his return in words similar to what Paul writes (Mat 24:31). On the other hand Paul, as an apostle, may have received this particular word directly from the Lord. Either way, he speaks with God-given authority, explaining to these believers what will happen when Jesus returns, or one aspect of what will happen. The Lord is gracious in revealing to us truths that we can comprehend, but there are many things we cannot comprehend. Even as we read these words our minds are stretched, but also filled with awe and wonder. Paul assures these believers that brethren they have buried will be raised to meet the Lord in the air when he comes.

Paul repeats what Jesus taught about his return, namely, he will come on the clouds of heaven, and he will send his angels with the great sound of a trumpet (Mat 24:31, cf. 1Cor 15:52). Paul refers to a great shout from the Lord, and to the trumpet of God and the voice of an archangel here in verse 16; the only archangel named in the NT is Michael (Jude 9). We read of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus shouting, ‘Lazarus, and come out! (John 11:43). When Jesus comes again it will not be as a baby in a barn; it will be as a king entering his kingdom in great glory. In coming on the clouds of heaven every eye will see him (Rev 1:7), and every ear will hear his shout; even the dead will hear! Yes, you will hear Jesus on that day, but if you do not hear his voice today you will shudder in great fear at his voice on that day!

It is an awesome but glorious picture we see portrayed here in the Bible, but the focus of the apostle is on the order of events at this time, an order that is elsewhere described as ‘in the twinkling of an eye’ (1Cor 15:52). What Paul wants these believers to know is that brothers and sisters who have died in Christ will by no means miss out on this glorious event? In fact, the ‘dead in Christ’, those who have ‘fallen asleep’, will rise first.

The dead will rise from their graves, or wherever their earthly remains are laid, with new heavenly bodies, to be joined with their souls being brought by the Lord (4:14, 16) - in the twinkling of an eye remember! Those who are still alive will be changed (1Cor 15:51, 52), and will ‘be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’ (4:17). What a glorious picture. Some artists try to picture this so-called rapture on canvas but it is too glorious to be portrayed by anything in this world. Besides, such glory cannot be taken in by our human eyes. Have you tried looking in the noonday sun? We will need heavenly bodies to take in such heavenly glory.

What follows this rapture? Some think the Lord will continue to come down to establish his kingdom on earth, but Paul does not say this. Besides, Jesus says, ‘I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am there you may be also’ (John 14:3). In the same passage he spoke of ‘My father’s house’ and of ‘preparing a place for you’. And Peter speaks of ‘the earth being burned up’ (2Peter 3:10). Heaven will not be this present earth. Where will heaven be? Heaven is being always with the Lord (4:17).

When Jesus returns- and the Bible speaks of only one *Parousia-* believers will be raised from the dead with new heavenly bodies, and those who are alive and remain will we caught up together with them with changed bodies also. Just because Paul says, ‘we who are alive’ does not mean he expected to be alive when Jesus returned; although in a way he did because he expected Jesus to return any day, just as all believers have done down through the ages until today. In the next chapter he goes on to explain that no one knows the day or the hour when Jesus will come, so ‘let us watch and be sober’ (5:6).

**4. Comfort one another**

The Thessalonians were ignorant or uninformed about where believers who had died, or fallen asleep, would be when Jesus comes again. When Jesus comes it will be the end, it will be the Day of the Lord. Paul wrote to inform them not simply for the sake of having knowledge, or getting into disputes about when this Day will be. He gives them information that they might have hope, hope that unbelievers around them don’t have. He writes that they might ‘comfort one another with these words’ (4:18).

Many believers, you included I assume, have been comforted by these words while mourning the loss of a loved one. We often hear these words at funerals, and for good reason; they are words with which we comfort one another. But they are words we remember every day because every day we should be expecting the Lord to return. Let us not be taken by surprise when Jesus does come, and let us not be ignorant regarding what the coming of Jesus will mean for us and for our loved ones. There will be no time to repent; the time to repent and believe in Jesus is today. And let us not be listening to philosophers and false teachers, ancient or modern. Let us listen to the word of God, where we find truth about sin and death, about the resurrection of the body and life everlasting: ‘We shall always be with the Lord’!