

Homily for Pentecost 23, 2020

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

'An informed hope'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

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TEXT

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

¹⁴*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.*

¹⁵*For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.*

¹⁶*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.*

¹⁸*Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

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INTRODUCTION

'But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope'.

St Paul's big concern in this text is for Christian people who are lacking in hope for the future.

In particular,

A lack of hope because of the power of death.

We don't know exactly why the death of their Christian loved ones in this early Christian community unsettled them so much,

But it did,

And we do know that grief is a powerful force that does strange things to people doesn't it?

To this,

St Paul wants to bring them encouragement and hope,

not just some vague wish for the future,

but the robust, informed Christian hope,

which is sure and certain.

If you lack hope for the future,
if you grieve the effects of death in one way or another,

Here is encouragement for you today.

And to bring this encouragement St Paul will get us to do three things,

first, looking **back** to something in the past,
second, looking **forward** to something in the future,
and third looking **beyond** into eternity.

Looking back,
Looking forward,
Looking beyond.

Informed Christian hope.

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LOOKING BACK TO JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

So first,
To grow in this informed Christian hope,
We need to look back.

Sometimes history teachers will speak about the need to walk backwards into the future.

The idea is that you need to know the past and learn from your mistakes in order to do well in the future.

Even in the leadership and self-help literature this sort of idea shows up a lot,
Just search it online and you'll find taglines like:
'Looking back to move forward'.

Well,
Something similar applies as the first step in growing in this informed Christian hope.

So, what are we to look back to?

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the anchor of our hope.

St Paul says:

¹⁴*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.*

Do you wonder if God really has power over death?

If the grave is really the end?

We return to the dust and that is it?

Where do we find hope in the face of this?

Well,

Our hope is not based on speculation about what might be possible.

Our hope is not based on wish fulfillment about what might be nice.

Our hope is not based on accounts of near death experiences or spectacular stories of people who claim to have visited heaven.

Informed Christian hope is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

In Christ God has already conquered death and the grave,

And as the Christian person has been united to Christ through baptism and faith,

His resurrection from the dead becomes the assurance of yours,

'Through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died'.

Let me give you a simple illustration.

Some of our young people in confirmation have just been doing their final text these last couple weeks.

And as is often the case they are fearful at this prospect,
And they ask what happens if they fail,
and this sort of thing.

So what do we say to encourage them?

Well,

One thing I say is simply,

You're not the first ones to go through this,

The young people before you have got through this,
We've helped them get through this,
We haven't lost anyone yet,

And guess what,

Even I did this once upon a time and I got through.

The point of comparison I'm making is simply to say,
that the completion of something in the past,
Can bring confidence to what they're facing in the present and future.

We look back to the death and resurrection of Jesus,
And so we have hope now as we face death and its power in our lives.

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LOOKING FORWARD TO JESUS' COMING AGAIN

Second though,
We are to look forward.

This too, is an important part of life generally isn't it?

As important as it is to look back and not forget what's happened in the past,

It can also be so helpful in everyday life to have things to look forward to.

And so St Paul gets us also to look forward in Christian hope to Christ's **coming again**.

¹⁵*For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.*

¹⁶*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

¹⁷*Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air...*

Now the first point to make here is how St Paul's argument is supposed to work,
Why the focus on the order of things here and who comes first and this sort of thing.

I think this is basically the idea.

These Christians were worried that their dead brothers and sisters in Christ were at a **disadvantage** when it comes to the Lord's return and the life to come.

And so to really emphasize that they need not worry about this,
and to build up their *informed hope*,

St Paul is saying,
Not only are they **not** at a disadvantage,
But Christ is coming for them first!

They're not getting left behind,
They'll have pride of place, in a sense.

It's like when little kids are there on New Year's eve trying to stay awake until midnight to watch the fireworks,

And one of them is falling sleep and the others are worried for them they're going to miss out,

But mum or dad says,

Don't worry,
I'll wake them up,
And in fact,
I'll hold them up with me so they even get the best view!

The dead in Christ will rise first,
They'll have the pre-eminent view of the glory of the coming redeemer!

That's the first point.

But the second thing here is to get the imagery of what's going on.

We've got the Lord descending with a loud cry,
An archangels call,
A trumpet,
Of Christians being caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,

How are we meant to understand and picture all this?

There is a lot of rich imagery here from the Old Testament and elsewhere.

It seems to be a mixture of things which are to do with announcing God's presence,
You get that with trumpets at Mt Sinai and the temple for example,

But also mixed together with a picture from the ancient world,

a scene where a city of people welcomes back a conquering king.

So the King is returning victorious,

And his messengers are out in front with trumpets and loud announcements letting people know
what's going on,
And inviting them to come out to meet the King,
And join in the procession.

Pastor Fraser suggested during the week a modern picture of this in a more everyday sense could be
going to welcome someone home from the airport.

A loved one in the family has been overseas, perhaps for years,
They're returning home,

And so we'll sometimes go to the airport to meet them.

I remember these occasions as a kid both when my family came back from living overseas and when we welcomed others back.

Think of it,

there are signs and sounds which announce the coming back,
whatever the equivalent of the loud cries and trumpets might be,

and so you are drawn out to meet them,

and there is great joy here,

and what I remember from those occasions is that not only do you meet the one returning,
but you also meet all the others who are there to greet them too.

You maybe end up at a café afterward catching up,
It's like a little reunion.

So it is with Christ's coming again.

'*caught up in the clouds together **with them***' – together with the dead in Christ,

This is an aspect of informed Christian hope,
That in looking forward to Christ's coming you will be reunited with those who are asleep in Christ.

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LOOKING BEYOND TO BEING WITH THE LORD FOREVER

We look back to Christ's death and resurrection,
We look forward to Christ's coming again,

And we look **beyond**, beyond that final day when,
as the text says,
we will '*be with the Lord forever.*'

Informed Christian hope looks back through history,
And it looks forward into history,
But even more than that it pulls us beyond history,
It draws us into eternity.

But notice,
the focus here is not eternity as an abstract concept,

The Christian hope is not just vague immortality,

The focus of Christian hope is being **with the Lord** forever,
And every other blessing of eternity flows from that central reality and experience.

Those of you who were here two weeks ago may remember when I preached on the new covenant I spoke about the goal there,
The goal is finally to know the Lord.

It's similar here,
The goal of Christ's death and resurrection,
The goal of his coming again,

Is simply that those who belong to him will be with him forever,
With him in the deepest and wonderful sense that we simply can't imagine.

I think this is good to keep the beautiful simplicity of this in mind when we hear of all the wonderful imagery of heaven and the life to come,

When we hear of the great marriage feast,
or the eternal city with streets paved with gold,
or the great multitude of angels and saints from every tribe and language,

it's so important to keep in focus that it all revolves around being with the Lord,

it's the marriage supper **of the Lamb**,
he is the **glory and light** of the city
the multitude is around the **throne of God**.

It's like when an old friend wants to visit another friend who's moved to a new city overseas,

And the friend says 'what do you want to see and do while you're in town?'

And the friend says,
I don't really care what else we see and do,
I'm coming to visit you,
I want to be with you,

Everything else around about you,
Is transformed because of the relationship,
Because of the one you're with.

It's the Lord Jesus to whom we look beyond for our eternal hope.

Your Lord Jesus who loves you,
Your Lord Jesus who died for your sins,
Your Lord Jesus who rose again to secure your resurrection,

The promise if that you will be with your Lord Jesus,
Not temporarily,

Not intermittently,

But always and forever,
In the eternal joy of his presence.

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CONCLUSION

We do still experience grief and sorrow in various ways,

We do still experience the strong of death in our lives,

And we can lack hope.

So let us receive the word of the Holy Spirit today through his Word,

To grow in this informed Christian hope.

By looking back to Christ's death and resurrection,

By looking forward to his coming again,

By looking beyond to being forever with him.

In Jesus' name, Amen.