

Sermon: 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Philippians 1:12-30 (21-24)

Theme: Christian Hope

Goal: That God would make us grow in the true hope by the resurrection of Christ

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Are you ready for your trip? St. Thomas people like to travel (me too) and a trip always needs some preparations. If it's a short journey, a small suitcase is enough. If it's a long one, passport needs to be provided, a special saving for the expenses needs to be done, and some basic information about the place we are going is needed, to know what kind of clothes we have to take with us, etc. etc.

Consider for a moment Polish rabbi Hofetz Chaim. When an American tourist saw his simple room filled with books, a table, and a bench, he asked, "Where is your furniture?" – "Where is yours?" replied the rabbi. "Mine?" retorted the puzzled American. "But I'm a visitor here. I'm only passing through." "So am I," said Hofetz Chaim. (Series A, p. 207).

Christian hope is something crazy for a non-believer. But if we are honest with ourselves, it is crazy for us as well. How can I hope in a heaven I haven't ever seen? And death is out of plan for our human nature. We were created to live and not to die; to live eternally. Death is an interruption in our plans and in God's plan too. But we know that this original reality was totally changed due to sin. We struggle against it; some people cannot accept it... but it is there. We cannot deny it and it is better to be prepared for the trip than to be caught unprepared.

God comes to our help and prepares us to be ready for the last trip. He gave us a map and good directions to follow. He even opened a travel agency to help us and provided a guide to escort us, so that we should not lose the way. The church is God's agency that provides all necessary documents for our trip and God's Son is the One who takes us by our hand and guides us safely to our heavenly home.

The example of faith, life and hope of the saints help us to grow in our hope and in our preparations while we wait for the day of the trip. The apostle Paul speaks clearly about his hope and his preparations in our text.

I – To depart

He says: "I desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is better by far." - Paul was in prison because of his ministry. Enemies of the Gospel put him to jail. If jails nowadays are not good places to stay, you can imagine how it was at that time. And usually the family of the prisoner had to provide food, clothes and other needs. As Paul didn't have a family member close to him, the church in Philippi sent someone to assist him, sending with him food, some money and other necessary stuff as well. But the guy became sick and almost died. When he recovered, Paul decided to send him back home for a while; and wrote this letter to the Philippians. It is a letter full of encouragement, hope and joy. In spite of his difficult situation in prison, Paul was filled with strength by the grace of God.

It is clear that Paul cannot think about life apart from Christ, whether in this life or in the life after death. He describes his experience of death as 'departing', as if it is going from one place or reality to another place or reality. Paul expresses a firm conviction that there is a much better life after this life. He believed and preached the resurrection of Christ. If Christ is living, then 'being with Christ'

involves a real life of fellowship (ABC 1442). In chapter 3 he states: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20).

II – To stay

But Paul is not selfish, thinking only about his situation. *Paul puts the need of those he ministers to ahead of his personal preference* (CSSB p. 1817). He has concern about his church. He says: “But it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” For the sake of his fellows, he is ready to stay as long as God allows him to work in His Kingdom. Martin Luther said once that *it would be easy to God to fill heaven taking people immediately after their baptism to assure their salvation. But God has a plan for each baptized: We should serve Him and serve our neighbour* (Free quotation, by heart). We all have a task in this side of heaven. And it is not a selfish life, but a life of work in God’s Kingdom, according to the Gospel (Matthew 20:1-16) we heard today: We are called by God’s grace to work in His vineyard. It doesn’t matter if I am called in the early years of my life or later, or if I have a lot to do or less. I have to value and be thankful that God chose me to work in His vineyard, the church; and shall not grumble against God’s generosity. *Whether I am welcomed into the pearly gates after a lifetime of service or a moment of conversion, it is a matter of gift, pure and simple* (Phil Brandt, USA). Our work implies our duties and responsibilities in the family, in the society and in the church. Nothing can be done without Christ and our behaviour, whenever we are and act, is a living testimony of our faith and of the presence of Christ in our lives. To witness Christ happens not just when I approach someone and tell him about Jesus, but also when I am kind

to someone, showing love and care; when I'm honest in my job; when I'm faithful to His church...

III – The balance

A Professor of mine once said: We live with one foot on earth and with the other in heaven. Paul expresses it saying: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in this body, this will mean fruitful labour for me.” *Life without Christ is unthinkable to him, - and to me too. It is because of Christ and for his sake that Paul wants to live his earthly life. Elsewhere he states, ‘the life I live in this body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). The main reason Paul wants to carry on living in this body is so that he can continue his fruitful labour for the Lord Jesus Christ* (ABC p. 1441). “Fruitful labour” means hard work. It doesn't mean that we have to work to reach heaven; but we have to work in God's Kingdom and not to be lazy. The tickets for our trip are already bought and paid by the blood of Jesus and the passport is ready and stamped by the cross of Jesus. “It is finished!” (John 19:30). But while we are in God's vineyard, there is work to be done. Paul appeals to his church members: “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” At the end of the day each of us will receive his reward according to God's love and generosity. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 21 September 2014