

Sermon: 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (v.13)

Theme: Our Christian Hope!

Goal: To comfort and to encourage each of us with God's promises about our death and resurrection

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Speculations on what happens when a person dies is common to all religions. Death is inevitable and the various religions and cultures developed different answers and rituals for this event. I'm still a little shocked with some of the funeral traditions we experienced in Kenya and I heard about here too. On the other hand, I am well surprised with the "celebration of life" that is done here, with a party like a birthday or another festive occasion. Is this "celebration of life" based on the Christian belief? I hope so.

Leaders of all big religions died and their bodies are still buried. Shrines are visited and people pay honour to the deceased and offer prayers to them. Christianity has its shrine too: The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. But the body of our Leader doesn't lie there anymore. The tomb is empty! And this gives us a totally different aspect of death and of the life after death. Because Jesus lives, we have hope and we know what happens to the departed ones.

The church in Thessalonica was a young church, founded by Paul just some months before. Doubts began to arise among the new Christians about the situation of the deceased. Are their souls still alive? Where are they? What will happen to them when Jesus comes the second time? Can we have hope on life after death?

Paul answered these and other questions in two short letters. The text for today is a very precious one, full of hope and encouragement on these matters, still valid and actual for us too!

### I – Don't be ignorant

The Thessalonians went to the right source to answer their questions. The apostle Paul was still alive and not too far from their city. Probably Timothy was shepherding them and he share their anxieties with Paul. Paul begins his answer saying: “Brothers, I don't want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep.” Ignorance causes disturbances and insecurity. Due to ignorance of God's revelation in the Bible many people are afraid of death and are not sure of what will happen to them. We don't have Paul alive with us anymore to answer our questions, but his words are still available and we have to search in the Bible to find answers to our questions about life after death and other issues as well. We will not find all the answers we raise, but the essential is clear: By faith in Jesus we are united with God for this life and for the eternal life. And this is what matters. Don't be ignorant, but search in the Bible and believe in God's promises. *One of the primary functions of the Word is to dispel ignorance* (Series A, p 231).

### II – Those who fall asleep

Paul doesn't use the terms “deceased”, “dead”, or “those who passed away”. He uses the term “those who fall asleep”. *Paul uses thus euphemism because the new life in Christ is eternal. Those who believe in Him do not truly die* (ABC p. 1463). Jesus said to Martha when her brother Lazarus died: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:26, 26). Jesus uses the same euphemism when He was on His way to raise Lazarus from the dead. He said to His disciples: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I

am going there to wake him up" (John 11:11); and when He went to Jairo's house and his daughter had just passed away, Jesus said: "Stop wailing. She is not dead but asleep" (Luke 8:52). Our body sleeps waiting for the resurrection, while our soul lives with God till both will be reunited in the resurrection of the last day.

III – Christ's death and resurrection is our assurance.

Why can Paul have this assurance to affirm this about "those who have fallen asleep"? Because of the death and resurrection of Christ! "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep." Our faith in Jesus is not "some faith". It has a purpose, it has a goal. I believe that my sins are forgiven on behalf of Jesus; I believe that I am a beloved child of God on behalf of Jesus; I believe that I have eternal life because Jesus promised it! Paul was drastic about this when he wrote to the Corinthians, hearing that some of them were denying the resurrection. He wrote: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruit of those who have fallen asleep"

(1 Corinthians 15:17-20). And we praise God every Sunday when we say at the beginning of the Holy Communion liturgy: ... *through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who on this day overcame death and the grave and by His glorious resurrection opened to us the way of eternal life.* And we confess our faith in the Apostles' Creed: *I believe...in Jesus Christ...on the third day He rose again from the dead... And I believe in...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.* This faith shall comfort us and encourage us when we face death of a beloved one or of ourselves.

#### IV – The coming of the Lord

The resurrection is not an event by itself, but it is connected with the second coming of Christ. We will talk more about this in the following services as we are approaching the end of the church's year. Paul doesn't scare us about the second coming of Christ, but he fills us with hope and joy! Of course our human nature is afraid of death and of judgment. But never forget: The resurrected Christ says: "Don't be afraid!" (Matthew 28:10). When doubts arise and you feel weak and scared, look to the living Christ, listen to His words and come to His fellowship at the Holy Communion! He is the Victor and He gives us His victory.

#### V – To be with the Lord

One more promise has to be highlighted in this text: "And so we will be with the Lord forever." The souls of those who have fallen asleep were with God and will come with Jesus to be united with their resurrected body again; and we, "who are still alive and are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." Paul lifts our eyes to Jesus, the Saviour. Don't worry about what is happening around. Jesus said about the last time: "When these things begin to take place, rejoice and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

Conclusion: Paul is very pastoral in this teaching. He wants to clear up doubts and he wants to comfort and to encourage people to look with good eyes to these matters. "Therefore encourage each other with these words." He knows that it is not that simple for us to leave this world and to face death. But in the fellowship of God's people, kneeling together at His altar to receive Christ Himself into our body, we are united with Christ and with each other for this life and for the eternal life. Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town 9 November 2014