

Pentecost 23
November 12, 2017
Christ the King
Kenner

Finally

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

I've titled this sermon "Finally," because I'm finally preaching on today's Second Reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. I did a quick check to see what I may have said about this passage before, and was surprised to discover I've never said anything about this one, in 50 years of preaching, beginning with my vicarage or internship in 1967.

Usually my problem is in finding something new to say about a text I've already preached on a dozen or so times. So this is unique.

Paul's words about life after death are old news to us, but to the Thessalonians and just about everyone else in the first century, he's answering one of the biggest questions always asked by humans, "what happens to us after we die?" Or is that it?

I picked up a sticker at a restaurant in Baton Rouge a few months ago. It says, "Eat right, exercise regularly, and die anyway." Again, is that all there is?

The Old Testament scriptures don't have much to say about what happens to us after we die. They talk about going down into the pit, mention a rather murky place called "sheol." But that's about it.

Some thought there must be something more. But even the Sadducees of Jesus' time spoke out against the strange notion of life after death.

So along comes Jesus who speaks quite openly and frequently about the life to come and who even makes promises to his followers with words like

these, "I go to prepare a place for you that where I am, you may be also" (John 14:3). Or "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though that person die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). He also talks about his return like a bridegroom to call us into the wedding banquet, as we heard in today's Gospel.

He even told the malefactor on the cross next to his, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

But as often as he said such things, Jesus' resurrection on Easter came as a complete surprise to his disciples. Yet that's when they began to understand all those promises he had made to them about their resurrections also, their lives after death.

This whole notion was new to his Jewish hearers, many of whom found it difficult if not impossible to believe.

St. Paul had to write to the skeptical Christians at Corinth that famous 15th chapter of his first letter to them,

" Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:12-20).

In other words, because he lives, we shall live also.

But there's more to be said, not just about the truth of the resurrection, but to encourage us in our lives here and now. And that's how Paul begins today's reading.

"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." Did you catch that? This is probably the most important thing he says in this passage. He doesn't want us to grieve "as others do who have no hope."

There's a difference, isn't there. All of us grieve the death of loved ones. That's natural. Paul isn't telling us not to grieve, but not to grieve the same way the hopeless grieve, because we do have the steadfast hope given us by faith in Christ, that our redeemed loved ones are with him.

Jesus will return as promised, he reminds us, and when he does, at his command, "with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet," the dead in Christ will rise. Then the rest of us "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 forever. Therefore," Paul ends today's passage, "encourage one another with these words."

That's especially true at the time of bereavement. It's natural for mourners to experience their loss deeply and to gather in sorrow. There are some

exceptions. Especially when the death has been a merciful end to the departed's suffering.

Or if it means an end to everyone else's suffering. A recent cartoon showed an usher handing out bulletins at the door of the church telling arrivals, "It's not so much a funeral as it is a celebration of his death."

Usually, however, people are looking for comfort at a funeral or a celebration of life. There is always comfort in the fond memories of those who knew and loved the deceased, but there's got to be more than that.

A couple of years ago Archbishop Aymond began forbidding eulogies from being spoken at Roman Catholic funerals in the archdiocese. "Eulogy" means "good words," the good words often spoken as part of the funeral by friends and family. Mostly very positive recollections.

Why forbid them? Well, sometimes they do drag on, as you know. But they're also a bit like Facebook postings which play up the good about a person while ignoring his faults. That's only natural.

Funeral homilies or sermons, by contrast, aren't afraid to say that the deceased was redeemed by the grace of God's love in Jesus Christ; has not earned a way into heaven through his or her good works - no matter how remarkable they were - but solely by the mercy of our gracious Father. That's what gives us confidence!

In fact, in our funeral liturgy, the final commendation says, "Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light."

And at church funerals, perhaps even more importantly, there is usually the solace and comfort and encouragement provided by music, especially the hymns we sing about God's amazing grace, about our "Rock of Ages," and pray for "A Closer Walk with Thee," while giving thanks "For All the Saints" who from their labors rest.

As in all Christian worship, at funerals also, God is always the center of attention, the God who created us, sent his son to redeem us and our deceased loved ones, and keeps his promise to take us to himself forever.