

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Remembrance Sunday

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians was the first of Paul's letters. He wrote it to a thriving church in Thessalonika, who missed him, and whom he missed. Their Christian faith has brought them into conflict with the Roman way: their declaration that Christ is Lord conflicts with the Roman dictat that Caesar is over all. They have been living in genuine peace with each other and with those around them, but the so called 'pax Romana' or Roman peace dictates that their kind of dissension from Caesar must be violently stamped out. Despite members of their church being killed, the church nonetheless thrives and grows — they remember that Christ's love and peace is greater than anything Rome can throw at them.

Paul addresses them in various ways, encouraging them and praising them for their faith, before beginning to answer some of their questions to him. Thinking of their recent martyrs they are curious whether the dead will be at a disadvantage compared with the living when Jesus returns. They are responding to pretty much the only thing that Paul got wrong — while all Christians expect that Jesus will return to reign over a renewed Earth, Paul expected that Jesus would return pretty soon. His answer is that the dead will first rise, and then, as Jesus returns, the faithful will form a welcoming party for Jesus coming down to Earth. He's thinking of a practice in their time — that when an important visitor arrived at a city, a delegation would go out to meet time, so as to escort them into the city. How can this happen if Jesus descends from heaven? Only by the faithful being caught up in the air, so as to then accompany him as he comes down to earth. Misunderstanding this point is the source of ideas about 'the rapture', which occur in a reading of theology called dispensationalism.

Regardless of the details of this — the point is that God is loving and just, and that all will be well when Jesus returns at his second coming.

Just as the Christians of Thessalonika remembered their brothers in faith who had died, so today we remember those we lost in the two world wars, and in other conflicts since then. We remember that they died to protect their family and their nation. We remember their courage and self-sacrifice. But we also remember that they died because war is awful. Remembrance Sunday is the day to think of the death, the loss and the pain, to resolve again to work for a peaceful world, and to pray for this.

We need not look far to find current reminders of the awfulness of war. I went to the Holy Land in 2018 on a church related visit — a pilgrimage. We saw a number of the important sites associated with Jesus, but visiting Bethlehem we saw more — the concrete walls around that city, a refugee camp, the way Israel treats Palestinians as second class citizens. We met a

Christian Palestinian who engaged in non-violent protest, and still campaigned and prayed for a workable, peaceful one state solution.

That conflict can be baffling to most of us. To those caught in the midst of it there is detail and nuance, political progress and regress, vengeance and counter-vengeance. In the last few weeks I've seen a few 'explanations' of the conflict on youtube. Helpful as they may be in part, a ten minute video cannot capture all of it. Most explanations have some egregious bias, one way or other. Derry-born Feargal Sharkey, speaking on 'Have I Got News for You', spoke of wishing Israel and Palestine could have twenty-five years of peace, as Northern Ireland has now had, just to know what that peace and prosperity might feel like. I'm sure we all think that.

Let's imagine what the answer might look like. Firstly a ceasefire, then patient diplomacy. Talking, listening, release of hostages. In any disagreement two conflicting sides typically go into discussions with very different ideas of what the answer might be. Israel and Palestine will need to want peace so much that they are willing to rip up their homework, and come to something brand new, together. As hard as that may be to imagine for lesser conflicts, this is all the harder. If this were still possible it would be required to be so nuanced that it allowed for all the pain and bad feelings of each person in both nations. And they would need to so trust their leader that they were willing to abide by the agreed terms. And for that even to be possible there should be the beginnings of a willingness to forgive, to exercise grace and mercy.

Does it sound impossible? I cannot see it happening tomorrow. But with time and determination remarkable change can happen. The country we fought against in two world wars has gone through repentance and soul-searching. It rewrote its constitution in order to protect itself from future temptations towards radicalism. It rebuilt its culture, and has become a model of peacefulness at the heart of modern Europe.

One of the things that allowed this to happen was an international recognition that Germany's pain after the war was as painful as our own. For Germany to recover they needed to be shown grace — and this was given.

No conflict now can simply be resolved by the one side annihilating the other. What the world needs is grace. Grace in *listening* to the other. Grace in *admitting faults*. Grace in recognising that in war *everyone is the loser*.

Returning to first century Thessalonika — the members of that church had lost family and friends to Roman persecution. They had a choice: resentment and revenge, or to submit those painful thoughts to the hope-giving, life-giving love and forgiveness that they had found in Jesus Christ. They chose the latter.

I hope and pray that we, and all the world will choose such a restrained, grace-filled path of peace in the conflicts we face.

Amen.

SDG.

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