
Words of Comfort, Words of Assurance

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 12 November 2023

1 Thess 4:13-18 • Rev 21:1-7 • John 14:1-14



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Why is it that we become Christians? Or if we are cradle Christians, why do we continue to follow Christ? It's a big question, and one we ought to ask ourselves from time to time.

I would guess that the answers most of us would give to that question include the promise we receive from God through Jesus Christ: that of eternal life in Communion with God. It could never be a complete answer, of course, because true love does not love for the reward, but for the beloved. We love God

because God first loved us, and continues to love us. Such love is returned unselfishly, without thought of reward.

However, there is a great reassurance in the promise, and God wants us to feel it. Today's readings are full of that reassurance.

First, we hear from Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians, who speaks about those who have died in the faith of Christ. This passage may be the most specific information in the entire Bible about what happens when Christ comes again. Paul was speaking from the standpoint of his belief that Jesus would come and the current age would end within his, Paul's, lifetime. He describes an amazing scene: God speaks, the angels sound their trumpets, and the dead are raised. First to be raised are those who have already died; then the living will rise also and meet in the air. Whom are they meeting? They are meeting the triumphal Jesus, and these words (as used in the original Greek) suggest the way that a triumphant general returned from victory on the battlefield: as soon as the people saw him in the distance, they would run out towards him, meeting him outside the city and then escorting him back in with shouts of joy. Christ, triumphant over death, will in the same way return as the victor, and will be escorted into the kingdom of God by his faithful disciples, alive and dead.

Why are they meeting in the air? Because, as you will recall from the Book of Acts, Jesus disappeared upwards after farewelling his disciples. So he will come again to the earth from the air, and the joyous disciples will meet him and escort him into his kingdom.

This is tremendously reassuring news to all of us today, and it was particularly so to Paul's original audience. That is because the first disciples shared Paul's belief that Jesus would come in their lifetimes; yet by the time this letter was written, some disciples had died, in the normal course of things. So they were glad to learn that the dead would rise as well. We today know that Jesus' return was not in Paul's lifetime, nor yet in the nearly two thousand years which followed. When it happens is not important: what is important to take away from this passage is the reassurance that Jesus will return, and that all those who have died in the faith, and all those faithful ones who will be alive when he comes, will share in that joyous occasion.

And after we all welcome Jesus back to his kingdom? Then, as Revelation tells us, there will be "a new heaven and a new earth." This passage brings us great hope and joy. Not only will earth and heaven be transformed, into such beauty as we cannot now imagine, but there is something else as well: God will dwell among us. We will be his peoples, and God himself will be with us. There will

be no more death, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev 21:3-4).

But before all this happens, there are our individual deaths to think about. No one likes to think about his or her own death. Jesus knows this, and so he spoke to his disciples one day to reassure them. He tells them not to be troubled, for he will be with them. It is useful to look at the end of chapter 13 of John, which comes just before our Gospel passage. Jesus, following what we know as the Last Supper, and after Judas departs to accomplish his treachery, begins to tell the other eleven disciples that he will go away soon, and they cannot go with him. They are of course very disturbed; they would follow him anywhere. So, to reassure them, he tells them that he will prepare a place in his father's house for them. And not only that, but he will return and take them there himself. Here we see Jesus confirming what Paul wrote. Jesus will come again, and all those who have died will greet him and welcome him as their Lord and victor over death.

The Bible is not a technical manual; it does not give an exact picture of what the afterlife will look like; but it does give us the all-important assurance that when we die, we will be escorted to God's house by Jesus, to await his return. And when he returns, we will all join with God in the new heaven and earth which God will create.

Jesus leaves us with one more bit of assurance. He tells Philip that whoever has seen him has seen the Father. Jesus was, and is, God among us. The one who promised us that he would prepare us a place in heaven is God. As we remember our loved ones who have gone before us, we will keep in mind Jesus' promise. It is for them, for us, for all who call on his name. Thanks be to God. Amen.