

Hope and Waiting

1 Thessalonians 4: 13- 18 (November 5, 2017).

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-14

13But 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. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

Historical Context

The Christians at Thessalonica have been worrying Paul. He is writing after he has heard from Timothy that they have kept their faith despite facing persecution (3:1-10). His concern to address the issue of what happens to people who have died may reflect awareness that in the persecution some had lost their lives, although Paul does not say so directly. He does, in any case, want to offer words of hope and for this he passes on what appears to be early Christian tradition about Christ's return (4:16-17).

Theme: Hope

It is hard to make much sense of such a passage today. We no longer believe the earth is flat or like a saucer; nor do we believe in an imminent return of Jesus, let alone in a form that would match Paul's imagery in any literal sense. At a very basic level we might identify with Paul's faith in the following terms. He looks at uncertainty and adversity. He believes in hope. He embraces the imagery and poetry of his day. He probably did not have a clear definition of where the imagery stopped and where the reality started. In any case we would draw it somewhat differently. His hope was, as it were, held in solution in a beaker of swirling imagination using standard ingredients. In all of this he was conveying the confidence that all does not end in oblivion and certainly not in hopelessness. Ultimately that hope does not depend on images or sequences or explanations about how, but on the nature of God.

Gospel Story as a Case Study (Matthew 25:1-13)

This parable is set between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his trial and crucifixion. And one thing Matthew and all the Evangelists agree on is that Jesus knew what was coming. And so here he is, teaching the crowds, facing off with his opponents, and instructing his disciples...even as he waits for the coming cross. Jesus, too, knows how difficult waiting can be.

Waiting for Jesus' imminent return is difficult for most of us to entertain. But let's also recognize that opportunities for waiting on Jesus' presence are all around us. Each time we work for justice, we testify to the presence of Jesus. Each time we bear each other's burdens, we testify to Jesus' presence. Each time we advocate for the poor, or reach out to the friendless, or work to make this world God loves a better place, we testify to the presence of the Risen Christ.