All Saints **Mark the Evangelist**
2/11/2014

1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:11
Psalm 1
Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints

Over the last couple of weeks we have been listening to the spirit of the exchange between Paul and his Thessalonian congregation. Today's reading shifts a little in focus from a recounting of what has happened between Paul and the congregation towards encouragement for the congregation's continuing walk in faith.

The section we heard today was fairly long for a Sunday reading, but we are trying to get right through the book in four weeks(!), with a revisit to part of today's reading again on the fifth week, when we return to the set lectionary readings. What we heard today might seem to lend itself to at least two sermons because of the apparently quite different content in the first and second parts of the reading.

Paul began with a general exhortation to moral living, first with reference to sexual morality and then more generally to the kind of life and being-with-others which is appropriate to people with faith in this particular God. Then he moved on to something which might seem a little more "doctrinal", in the sense that it relates not so much to what we are to do as to what is going to happen to us.

Here we strike a problem in how we've been reading the letter – focussing more on the wood than the trees, more on the whole than on the detail. Can we harmonise these two quite different parts of the reading? What has how we live got to do with the end-time questions Paul deals with here, except possibly that a certain kind of life will render us either beneficiaries or victims of the end-times as he describes them?

And yet, even this is not the angle Paul takes here. There is no threat implied his account of the resurrection of the dead or the timing of the Lord's return. Any threat which such an end-time might imply has already been dealt with for the Thessalonians; they are among the elect, the saved: the end-time is something to which they look forward, and not something they fear.

It's worth noting in passing how this stance to the end-time differs from what I suspect is typical in our own thinking here. First, much talk today about "heaven" and the life we might share together in some future after-death experience is cut loose from the dynamics Paul draws on here. There is in Paul no notion of being restored to loved ones, a kind of "family reunion" when everything is returned to the best we have known of each other. It is death and life understood with respect to the person and work of Jesus which is the point. Whatever the final resurrection is supposed to look like, it is always to be imagined with respect to what God did in and with the crucified Jesus. If our thinking about "life after death" does not operate out of that work then it is, at the very least, not specifically Christian thinking. To recall the season we mark today, the communion of saints is a community of the sanctified – of those somehow sifted through the cross.

In addition to this, our experience of God and of death is quite different from that of Paul and Thessalonians. They had an expectation of an imminent return of Christ – something most likely to happen within their life-time. It was this which created the crisis which Paul seeks to address: what about those who believed and yet have died – have they missed out? Paul's response is No. For us the situation is almost the reverse: we *expect* to die before any such end of the world occurs. We might even be disappointed if we didn't get a full run at life, perhaps with the cosmic End occurring just after our personal end(!). As a result, the question of the Day and the Hour are not at all pressing for us, and are even an embarrassment. We hear this text both as our own – the thinking and so the doctrine of the church – and also as quite foreign.

So, on the one hand we hear ethical exhortation which seems to make sense to us and, on the other, doctrine about the divine ordering of the cosmos which makes much less sense. For Paul and his first readers these are intimately linked: the good life anticipates the end – *models* the heaven – which is awaited in the return of Christ. Or, the other way around, the imminence of the end is the "pressure" which gives rise to the good life. Paul's account of the return of Christ is not mere information, but makes a difference to his people "here and now" (back then!)

For us, however, talk of the end in these terms feels rather more like mere information; the "pressure" it applies on us is less ethically motivational than it is simply the difficultly of holding an alien thought. And it would be a mere contrivance to try to whip up a belief that the world is all about to end, and so to justify to ourselves and to others that the ethic Paul calls for is how the smart money will now bet.

Yet towards the end of the section we heard this morning there is a hint as to how we might honour Paul's own cosmology and our own, each in their own place.

What our modern translation tends to hide from us is that Paul develops his understanding of our relationship to the end-times and our relationship to the living and the dead out of an extended pun, or play on words. After remarking that the day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night", he goes on to say :

> "[5.4]But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; [5]for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness."

And then the pun:

> [6]So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; [7]for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.

The play is that, when he earlier referred to the Thessalonians' concern about "those who have died" – as it was put in our translation – in fact he wrote "those who have fallen asleep": "we do not want you to be uninformed…about those who have *fallen asleep* (4.13)"

What Paul says about this, then, is

> "So then, let us not live-as-if-dead, in the way that others do, but let us truly live"

There are two kinds of "sleeping" running through his argument here. There is the sleeping which is *merely* dying – note that, *merely* dying – and there is the sleeping which looks like being awake – looks like being alive – but is far more deathly than the fact that our hearts will one day stop beating.

"[5.9]For God has destined us not for wrath," he continues, "but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, [10]who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him". That is, whether we are physically alive or dead, we live in him. Recalling the general preacher's principle that it is better to be interesting than to be right, we can overstate the case slightly and declare: to have died "in the Lord" is simply a particular way of believing, of being "in" him.

The thing towards which we are living is what determines whether we are awake or asleep, truly alive or merely the walking dead. The world as we see it, with no future other than more of the present, is *not* a world which creates true life. This is what Paul's cosmology indicates: there is another world coming, breaking over and into this one, re-creating and renewing what has forgotten true love and true freedom.

This new world – or at least its imminence – is not something we today can adhere to quite so strongly as Paul did, but we must be able to see what it indicates. The new world is a way of speaking about the old. And, as a promised new world, it is a way of realising now something of that newness: that our lives not be lived without hope (5.13).

There are other ways of indicating the pressure of newness which are less starkly cosmological than Paul, but which Paul himself also uses.

We noted this last week the strength of the language with which Paul affirmed the Thessalonians: "you are our glory, you are our joy; we live, as long as you continue to stand". This is an account of openness to the new which doesn't draw on cosmological categories but on relational, inter-personal ones, but is just as strong in what it conveys. What I need, what will lift me out of the poverties of the world I have created for myself, is you, in Christ – God's work in Christ is the third party in every such declaration. I stand, in him, as long as you continue to stand in him. This is what sleepers say to those who have been awakened, what the dead say to those who are alive, what those despairing say to those who still hope.

Tending again a little more towards the interesting than the completely correct, we might say: the communion of saints – the dead in Christ, the living in Christ, those yet to be in Christ – can bear the load of being the means and the end of the whole story

And so, quote from the hymn with which we'll finish our service today: we give thanks "for all the saints who from their labours rest", and we "fight as [they] who nobly fought of old", and look forward to "the peaceful calm of paradise the blest" because this is how we are being recreated, and the end for which we are being re-made.

And in this we live in the dawn of "a yet more glorious day"; the passing by of the King of glory,

> life, love and freedom in God, the Three-in-One by whom and in whom all is, has been, and will be.

For such a promise, and the gift of each other in whom it is being realised, all thanks be to God, now and forever, Amen.

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