

Tue 14 May 2013



**Reading:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

## 1. Introduction

- **Words to the family**

Jill, I want to thank you for the honour of being asked to preach today. Our hearts really go out to you, Bec, Tim and the whole family in your devastating loss of a husband, father and grandfather. The rest of us have lost a friend, a colleague, a devoted pastor and priest, but for you in the intimacy of the family, this has been a painfully excruciating and an extended emotional roller coaster ride, with extreme highs and lows and unexpected twists and turns. I myself have lost count of the number of Lazarus type moments you have experienced in recent years! But as even Lazarus had to die twice, it was clearly God's time for our brother Chris to be relieved of his suffering and depart to be with the risen Christ whom he had loved and served all his life.

- **Reflections on Chris**

Today we gather to give thanks to God for two remarkable people. We give thanks for Chris Short. We resonate with Tim's moving family tribute. Chris was a passionate man, who lived life to the full. From my perspective he was remarkably *loyal and faithful*. For example, he responded to his Bishop's request to leave a thriving Canberra church to return to Bega parish to seek to restore it to health. He poured his all into his ministry, devoted to lovingly serve his people. Further in the midst of his own pain he continued to remember his friends. The last text message I received from him in April read in part: *'Had a tough week or so adjusting to pain management morphine medication levels.....Pray for you guys daily also. Love in Him.'* In terms of loyalty I daresay he also rejoiced that his beloved Brumbies were at the top of the ladder. Chris was also remarkably *forthright and definite* in his opinions. One never died wondering what Chris thought. For example, he hated ambition in the church. He was a very able priest himself, but there was no way he was going to climb any greasy ecclesiastical pole. He was so focused on giving to his people here, I remember him resigning his archdeaconry for a season, and also 'politely' quizzing both Bishop George and me about what was going on when I was nominated to be an Assistant Bishop. In particular he wanted to know whether we had done some deal. He detested pretentious humbug anywhere. Furthermore he was remarkably *grateful and loving*. The first hymn we sang today was so evocative, because it epitomised Chris' life of faith and dependence on the grace of God. When I stayed with Chris & Jill on my pastoral visits, he always sang the praises of the people of this congregation who were supporting them and providing for their

needs as a couple. It is always a healthy sign when a priest compliments their congregation, rather than complaining about them to the visiting bishop!

Chris was a remarkably loyal, faithful, forthright, definite, grateful and loving person. However he was not perfect. As a very determined and focused person with an engineering mindset who liked getting things done, he could also be remarkably infuriating at times. There were times over recent years when the family could have figuratively but lovingly wrung his neck!

- ***Focusing on Christ***

Today we thank God for Chris Short, but we also thank him for his lifetime friend, the Lord Jesus Christ. Death is an unnatural obscenity in God's world. It is the inevitable fruit of human rebellion against God. It destroys beauty and relationships. It mocks at all our achievements. Moreover despite all our impressive modern medical knowledge and technology we cannot arrest the inevitable processes of decay in our bodies. In the end death is the last enemy we must all face, but as Christians we do not grieve as those who have no hope because of what Christ has done in his death and resurrection and what he will do on his return. The apostle Paul deliberately wrote this section of 1 Thessalonians to reassure new Christians about the destiny of those who die in the faith of Christ. They were worried about the fate of their dead friends and relatives, so Paul writes to reassure them and encourage us on the basis of the return of the risen Jesus.

## **2. The Return of Christ Means Resurrection**

- ***The dead in Christ will rise first (16b)***

The Bible makes it plain that all history is moving to a climax in the return of Jesus. Using vivid picture language Paul says that dead Christians who are with Christ now, will be resurrected with new and transformed bodies then –

*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

The risen Jesus will return in triumph. Dead Christians will accompany him back in his victory procession. On that day it will be plain that they have been completely and thoroughly renewed. But how can we be so certain? If the mechanics of the event are mind boggling, and the language is inadequate to describe such an awe inspiring event completely outside our present mode of experience, how can we be so certain? Is our hope clutching at straws? Of course not! Our hope is hope because it is unseen and not because it is uncertain. The text gives at least two reasons for certainty –

- ***The resurrection of Christ (14a)***

In the first place, our hope is based on the resurrection of Christ. Paul quotes from a creed in much the same way as we recite a summary statement of the Christian faith in our gatherings. He writes *we believe that Jesus died and rose again*. Our hope is based on the death of Christ and his real physical resurrection. He died the death which removed the sting of death (like removing the fuse from a bomb he removed the penalty of our sin so we do not have to die spiritually). But he rose again on the third day as a guarantee of our resurrection.

- ***The promise of Christ (15)***

In the second place, our hope is based on the promise of Christ (15), such as found in John 6:40 -

*For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.*

Our hope is based on the resurrection of Christ and the promise of Christ. For those in Christ, death is a brief dark tunnel into the presence of Christ. They will return with him, and they will be made like him in his glorious resurrection. The second coming of Jesus means resurrection.

### **3. The Return of Christ Means Reunion**

If Act 1 of this cosmic drama is the return of Christ with his glorified saints, then Act 2 sees the Christians who are alive at the time being transformed in the blink of an eye and being snatched up suddenly for a great reunion in the air. If we are alive on that day there will be a great meeting with all departed believers and also with the Lord himself.

- ***With our fellow believers (17a)***

This will be the greatest reunion of all time. We will be reunited with those from our families who trusted in Christ in life and in death, but we will also meet for the first time people we have only ever previously met in print. I am referring to people like the Apostles John, Paul or Peter or great Christian leaders like Martin Luther or John & Charles Wesley. The initial meeting will take place in *the air*. Such is the measure of God's power that we will meet in the area traditionally regarded in New Testament times as the dwelling place of evil spirits. We will accompany Christ back to share in his judgement of the world (1 Corinthians 6:2), and to then enjoy the new heavens and new earth, the home of righteousness, forever.

- ***With the Lord (16-17)***

But even more exciting than being reunited with our vast Christian family, this will be the moment when we all see our Lord face to face. We will meet *the Lord* (17). To describe this meeting Paul uses a technical word derived from the visits of dignitaries to a city. The visitor would be met formally by the citizens or a delegation of them and that person would be ceremonially escorted into that city. We who live in Canberra are very familiar with such a practice when the red carpet is rolled out and the Prime Minister or Governor General greets the visitors and there is a motorcade to Parliament House or some other such destination.

So we meet the returning Jesus to be his escorts. We meet Jesus who is God. This is the implication of the language used. The trumpet, the cloud and the voice were all present at Mt Sinai when God first met his people after the Exodus event (Exodus 19-20). So this return is the final coming of God to his people. Paul simply says *and so we will be with the Lord for ever* (17b).

Nothing in all creation can destroy our relationship with Christ. If we belong to him by faith now, we will be with him forever. The reunion with our extended Christian family will be great, but this meeting will be even better!

## 4. Conclusion

The return of Jesus means both resurrection and reunion. This is why this funeral can be triumphant. This is the fantastic hope for every Christian person here this morning. We need no longer be oppressed by the fear of death. Death is a defeated foe, a vanquished enemy. As John Donne put it in one of his famous sonnets –

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee*

*Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;*

*For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow*

*Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.*

When he was in his final illness a famous nineteenth century evangelist said 'Soon you will read in the newspapers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe it, for I shall be more alive than I am now'. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he was marched to his execution famously said 'this is the end, but for me the beginning of life'. If Chris Short could speak now, he would say the same things.

In conclusion there are two important practical implications for all of us today -

- ***Don't grieve as those without hope (13b)***

Please notice that Paul does not say we must not grieve. Like Jesus, we should feel angry at the existence of death which destroys relationships and brings so much pain. Like Jesus at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, we must weep. It is completely insensitive to expect Christian people to get over their loss quickly because they are Christian. Grief has its cycles and like a bell rings long after it has stopped being pulled; the pain resonates and unexpected things will trigger the memory of the hurt again. Jill I understand you were with Chris in his last earthly moments. I understand he sat up, spread his arms, looked joyful and then fell back peacefully to die. It is not too fanciful to believe that the risen Christ had come personally to escort him to the Father's house. You will remember this for the rest of your life. But I want to remind you and your family that when you feel lonely and bereft in days to come, the same risen Christ is there. When you wake up in the night anxious about the future, Christ is there. When your heart is breaking with inconsolable tears, Christ is there. When you try to fathom what is happening in your life and you feel completely numb, Christ is there. Jesus has promised never to leave you or forsake you.

We will all miss Chris in different ways but we do not grieve as those without hope. Our tears can be tinged with joy because in the midst of our deep sadness we have the quiet hope of resurrection and reunion.

- ***keep encouraging one another (18)***

Finally we must keep on encouraging each other *with these words* (18). We must actively exhort or comfort each other. We are to keep reassuring one another that the power of God will never be defeated, and that in spite of sickness, suffering or even death, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Whether we live or die, we are his, and when he returns we will be with him forever. The return of Jesus is a source of great comfort for all those who trust him as Saviour and Lord as Chris Short did. So as we confess at each Eucharist, let's keep taking the following words to heart -

***Christ has died.***

***Christ is risen.***

***Christ will come again.***

By **Bishop Trevor Edwards**