

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

GRIEVING IN HOPE

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

13 But 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. 15For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16For 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. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. 18Therefore encourage one another with these words.

DIAGNOSIS: Grieving as Others Do

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Death Happens

As years passed and the Christian community in Thessalonica continued to survive, some of its Christian members died. Death still happened to believers as it did to non-believers. So the question was being asked, "When Paul proclaimed that Christ has conquered death, what does that mean?" The old answer that Jesus would come quickly to set up the kingdom and so spare the faithful of death no longer had credence. So naturally, they wondered, what about those who have already died? How will Jesus

handle that problem when he returns?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Grieving with Speculation

This was not simply an intellectual query. Death has always been one of those grief-inducing facts of life that every culture and every age had learned simply to “accept.” Indeed, it was that problem in life for which there is no confirmed fix. True, religious speculation about death abounds in every culture and every age has a way to “accept” it. In the Platonic speculation of Paul’s day the idea of the immortality of the soul dominated, as it probably still does today. Is that also how Christians grieve, in speculation “as others do” (v. 13)? Is that all we have—speculation?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Wordless

Ultimately, it would appear that our speculation is only a front for the fact that God is wordless/silent on the subject. Death happens and God lets us speculate. Why? Why would God do that? And so we speculate some more “as others do.” We know from our own human experience why we remain silent/wordless on troubling matters. We do that when we can’t handle the truth or when we can’t fix the problem. In other words, the silence of God is an expression of what Paul calls “the wrath that is to come” (1:10). Therefore, in the last analysis nothing good can ultimately be said about death. Or, as Paul says elsewhere: death is “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:26).

PROGNOSIS: Grieving in Hope

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Word of the Lord

But as Paul now reminds the Thessalonian faithful, we do have “a word of the Lord” on this matter—a word that is not just speculation but historically, evidentially confirmed. The

evidence is this, “Jesus died and rose again,” and the promised implication of this is clear, “God will bring with him those who have died” (v. 14). How will this happen? What happened to Jesus himself provides the answer. Remember how he died and his disciples were “left behind” (v. 17), but God raised him up so he could come to them and greet them with hope. That is also the way it will be with those who died before you who are “left behind.” They will be raised from the dead and they will be the first to be greeted by Jesus. Then it will be your turn. You who were left behind will then be gathered up into this cloud of resurrection glory with them and there remain with them forever (v. 17). This is the word of the Lord.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Grieving with Hope

To be sure, the “word of the Lord” does not give us all the “historical” details about the consummation of the age to come. But it does give us enough “information” (cf. v. 13) so that we can “grieve with hope,” thus leaving behind anxious speculation. For we can expect to be with those who have gone before us not in a reduced way, as Platonic souls or sweet memories, but as new, wholly resurrected selves in the Lord. So while Christians do still grieve the loss of their loved ones—for death is still a terrible enemy to be destroyed – they do not “grieve as other do,” in speculation, but hope.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Encouraging One Another

Finally, it is this hope—not speculation—that shapes the entire ethos of the Christian community. Because of this hope the Christian community is identified a community of mutual encouragement in the Lord (v. 18). In this community, Christians share one another’s grief and uplift one another in their loss by gently reminding each other that we have a “word of the Lord” even for this, especially for this! This encouragement is not

meant to dismiss the grief of them who mourn, but to “inform it” with Christian hope.