

Preparation – Half the Battle!

[Amos 5¹⁸⁻²⁴; Psalm 70] 1 Thessalonians 4^{13-end}; Matthew 25¹⁻¹³

*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.
[Matthew 25¹³]*

It is poignant today as we remember those who were sacrificed in two World Wars and conflicts in every year since as my son is being deployed today to serve in the Royal Navy in the Gulf. When he passed out from Dartmouth as an officer in the Senior Service, a second career for him, I was blunt with him and said that the only medal I never wanted to see was the Queen Elizabeth II medal, the one given to families of those who have been killed on active service. How many parents through the years will have shared the same sentiments?

It is so important that the Church takes the lead in local and national remembrance events as it is uniquely placed to do so. That is because while so many focus on so many deaths over the years, the Christian message goes beyond this and is always about hope in life after death.

In an email exchange about Handsworth Cemetery running out of space I did (rather naughtily) suggest that the solution was that we pray for the Second Coming of Christ – more about that in a minute - that would leave plenty space for those who would then need to be buried.

We try to avoid glorifying war and elevating those killed doing their duty to becoming martyrs, balancing that with our gratitude for the price they paid so that we can have freedom. Had we had the Old Testament reading for today we would have heard the cry from Amos, **let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream**. Justice and righteousness are the things that only just justify conflict and uniquely dignify the engagement with and casualties of war.

Those who focus on death alone are like the **foolish bridesmaids** of the Gospel, while those who know that death is the gateway into God's presence are like the **wise bridesmaids** who can have confidence!

As we have a look at what Paul says to the Thessalonian Christians the Christian hope isn't that we live forever, but that we live forever with God – **and so we will be forever with the Lord:**

- ✘ This letter was probably written within 20 years of the death of Jesus. At that time the Church expected that Jesus would appear again at any moment and that the death of some Christians was unfortunate. You can see as his letters develop how Paul's copes with the fact that Jesus' second coming seems to have been delayed and death becomes more inevitable, just as we are all learning how to cope with variables that we aren't in control of.
- ✘ The hope that Christians have in the face of death in is the resurrection – **we believe that Jesus died and rose again and God will bring with him those who have died.**
- ✘ The worry seems to be that the living will get to meet Jesus before those who have died, so Paul assures them, **that we who are left until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who have died.**
- ✘ What Paul wants us to **encourage one another with** is the great vision of Christ breaking into time. What a dramatic event that will be! There will be a **cry of command** (how suitable when we think of the trenches), **the archangels call** which will be new to us all I imagine and **the sound of God's trumpet** which will be deafening! In the middle of all of this Christ will **descend from heaven** and at the same time **the dead in Christ will rise** and so that there is no fear of being left out **we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air**. How thrilling – and especially so because even those Christians who dismiss this as one of the 'Comic Strip' moments in the Bible won't be left behind!
- ✘ The words we used at the silence, *Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn*, is the Christian hope of being with the Lord forever!

Death does not defeat people of faith, whatever conflicts we may face!