

### *The message is clear*

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ESV)*

This week as I was driving I listened to a podcast exploring the language and morality of money in the aftermath of the financial crisis. One item piqued my interest – something I hadn't heard before – a popular theory which relates money and consumerism with its boom and bust cycles to the popularity of certain horror characters – zombies and vampires. I hadn't heard this before but the panel of experts on the podcast were all aware of it. In summary the theory – with recognition of its flaws – postulates that in time of economic boom zombies are in the ascendancy on the big and little screens, in books – they're just everywhere. In times of recession it is the vampires that come forth and take centre stage. This was all new to me – zombies are allegedly representative of mindless consumption – consuming anything and everything – whereas vampires represent the lean times with their guilty consumption and self doubt. I'm not into horror as a general rule – I don't watch it on TV, DVD, streaming or at the movies – but I mention them not to talk about the economy, money, and the language that surrounds them important as they might be – but to make the point that even a horror averse person like me doesn't have to ask someone about zombies or vampires or check the internet, I know what they are – as I imagine you do as well. Strange as it seems, these fictional characters are part of our world, so much so that we can even make theories or allusions or associations with them.

Is it because they are associated with the edges of life, with death, and beyond? Possibly. We are fascinated by what might be beyond this 'vale of tears'. Who's to say that it isn't more tears? Our society here and in the US and Australia has a general worldview about death not held as consistently as it once was – that life goes one way, we die, and there's something beyond. Influenced by 2,000 years of history, people also know about heaven and hell. They might be fuzzy on the details but pretty much everybody who still accepts that basic landscape has the view today that 'good people go to heaven' and 'bad people go to hell' – never mind people not thinking it through or checking with Christianity to see if that is what Christianity teaches. These things are part of our world – just as time being circular and the transmigration of souls is part of India and Asia.

Back in the time of Paul's writing to the Christians in Thessalonica the people – influenced we can imagine by Judaism and the Greek and Roman worlds – would have an amalgam of views about life and death and whether there was life after death. Within Judaism the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed over the resurrection. The Pharisees believed a resurrection happened while the Sadducees didn't – they believed that people stayed in the place of the dead – Sheol – which is not hell by the way – but what I said: the place of the dead – a waterless, joyless, grey, nothing of an existence.

Roman popular views involved the ferryman, the river Styx, being judged and suffering punishment if you've done wrong or a heavenly reward if not. It was popularly held that a poor or shoddy burial resulted in denial of the underworld and a purgatory-like existence instead. The Greeks also had an afterlife with destinations dependent on performance in this world but they had an additional view that it was the memory of the living that defeated the power of death for memory meant existence in Elysium.

And now along comes something new – after all, no one had risen from the dead before – hard enough to do in a myth but this was in a time and place and with so many eyewitnesses – and so this good news of Jesus had to be taken seriously. And what people discovered was not them accepting a proposition – another Jewish or Roman or Greek variation on a theme – but something radically new and different – really I should say ‘someone’ radically new and different – Jesus, the crucified man is alive and the only explanation that made sense – and still makes sense – is that he is both truly human and truly God who has rescued us from the power of death to have the last word. After all, he said: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25,26).

But the decades were progressing and now people were dying. What do you do with death when you follow a person who promises that you won’t die when believe in him? Again you turn back to the common stuff ‘everyone knows’ and in the Apocrypha in IV Esdras 13:14 it was simply said that those who were left – the living – were more blessed than those who have died. Death was a deficit for the deceased just as the living might mourn them – but it was better to be alive.

We don’t know specifically what was troubling the Thessalonians – their zombie, vampire, life after death but no comforting details situation – but they had asked Paul and he was replying to them in this letter with ‘a word from the Lord’ – which we generally regard as a revelation he had received from Jesus. And what he says is comforting and straight forward – no one misses out on being with Jesus – dead or alive, one does not have an advantage over the other – just as what he says is also mysterious and spectacular – for when the trumpet blasts that ‘time is up’ and the Lord descends God sees that Jesus brings with him those who have fallen asleep – ie. those who have died. And there will be a glorious meeting in the clouds – just as one might line the streets for a royal parade so clouds announce the presence and the hiddenness of God – everyone in Christ – baptised into his death whether physically dead or alive at that moment gathers.

Why? To always be with the Lord.

So? Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The message is clear and straight forward. Unfortunately the Church over the centuries has not encouraged but squabbled and debated matters of an empty versus a full heaven, body soul issues, where the dead are now before the Lord brings them with him to that glorious meeting in the clouds and in doing so lose that encouragement and comfort that the message actually conveys.

If the event of dying and death and the story of life after death doesn’t have Jesus, then no matter what it is has, there is no hope – not really. Wishful thinking at best and nagging discomfort that troubles and gnaws. But where there is Jesus – where the story of his death and resurrection are in focus – then the details are not for us – but the picture – like last week’s scene from Revelation 7 – is all we need. Encourage each other in the trauma of death, Paul says. Good advice. It is not meant to be flippant or uncaring for death is painfully horrible as we are separated from loved ones but as Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Romans 14:8,9 ESV) And as he said to the Christians in Thessalonica having painted that scene of everyone in the air: And so we will always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 3:17b ESV).

So let us encourage each with these words and the comfort and hope only Jesus can bring.