

The Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 6:12-16
<i>Response</i>	In you, Lord, I have found my peace.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 25:1-13

The thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A continues our journey through the letter of Paul—the first letter of Paul—to the Thessalonians. And this brings us to one of the most famous passages in the letter...actually *the* most famous passage in the letter, and arguably the passage that's really at the heart of the letter. Most scholars think that this is the primary reason Paul wrote this letter was to address the problem of Christians who had died before the second coming that many of the Thessalonians were grieving over and anxious about with regard to their salvation. So let's read the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. And we're going to look at Paul's famous teaching on the resurrection and the *parousia*.

Now before we read this, I want to do a little caveat here, because this passage is not only famous because it's one of Paul's classic statements about the second coming and the resurrection...it's also famous because it's one of the key passages that lays the foundation for the modern Protestant idea of a secret rapture of Christ that will take place before the Great Tribulation breaks out in the world. And you've probably heard of this idea of a secret rapture, especially if you live in American context. But I think it's become more well known around the world in our day and time. So when people talk about "the rapture," this isn't the only passage in the New Testament that people will use and appeal to to substantiate that doctrine, but it's definitely the *locus classicus*. This is the classic text, because it actually uses the language of a rapture or being caught up in the clouds.

So let's read the words of Paul with that in mind, and we'll ask ourselves...is Paul describing here a rapture—a secret rapture? Or is he talking about something else? And as you'll see, the answer is something else. But I want you to walk with me through the verses so that we can see in context exactly what that something else is. So in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 we read this:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning 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 the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, 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, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.¹

Pause there. The first thing I need to do is...let's just get the rapture nonsense off the table here, so that we can look at what Paul is actually trying to say here. So what makes some interpreters think Paul is talking about a secret rapture of Christ in verse 17 there, where he says that we will:

...be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...

Now it's fascinating here that this Protestant tradition of a rapture is actually based on a Latin translation of Paul's word here. So in the Latin vulgate translation of 1 Thessalonians 4, the word for "caught up" is *rapiemur*—to be caught up together in the clouds. And so that word becomes the root for the rapture, the catching up, the gathering up of the true believers in Christ. And in Protestant dispensationalism—in American Protestant dispensationalism, especially since the late 19th, early 20th century—the idea of the rapture is basically this: that before the Great

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Tribulation breaks out at the end of time, before this period of suffering that will precede the final judgment takes place, there is going to be a secret catching up, a secret rapture of true believers so that they will disappear from the Earth and they won't have to suffer through that time of tribulation. They'll be raptured, and those who are left behind in the world will suffer, will experience the tribulation. Some will convert, some won't. And then finally, Christ will return at his second coming and will judge the living and the dead.

Now this novel idea has no basis in the text. It's a perfect example of proof texting...of taking one word out of context, one idea out of context and making a false interpretation on its basis. But if you look at the passage here carefully, you will see that Paul is not talking about a secret rapture. He's talking about a public *parousia*. He's not talking about a secret gathering up of the elect. He's talking about the public second coming of Jesus at the end of time that will coincide with the resurrection of the dead.

And you can see that if you just read through the text and put it in context. Let's just work through it verse by verse and we'll see what I'm talking about. So if you go back to verse 13—don't just start with 17, read the whole thing—it begins by Paul saying:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Okay, pause. What's the context there? Well, in ancient Judaism—in Scripture and in the New Testament—to sleep was a metaphor for death. So in our day and time, people will use other euphemisms for death. You've probably heard people say, "Oh, he passed" or "He passed away." Well, that's a kind of gentle, kind way of saying that someone died. So it's a euphemism describing someone's going away rather than dying. So in first century AD, they would use the euphemism of sleep. So "someone fell asleep" was a way of describing the fact that they had died. So what's going on is that in the Church at Thessaloniki, some people have fallen asleep. They've died. And the Christians in that congregation—who are converts from paganism, many of which don't have any solid beliefs or ideas about the

afterlife—have lost hope, because they assume that if you die before the second coming, then you won't actually be able to share in the resurrection.

So they were grieving over the dead, thinking that they would not be saved simply because they died too soon...before the second coming of Christ. So Paul is saying, "Look—no, no, no, no. I don't want you to grieve like the pagans who have no hope. Don't grieve over those who have fallen asleep." Alright, so he's going to give them the faith:

...we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

In other words, what Paul is saying is, those who have died, if they have died in Christ, are actually going to come—they're going to return to us. They're going to come with Jesus when He returns at His second coming. He's going to bring them with Him. So they're not lost. They are with Christ. And then he goes on to explain, he continues:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord...

So this is like a solemn declaration of divine revelation...

...that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord...

Highlight that, so important. The Greek word there for "coming" is *parousia*. It is the standard word used by Jesus Himself in the Gospels, but also by Paul to talk about the second coming of Christ. It literally means presence, but it means He's going to return. He's going to be present with us again. So he says:

For 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, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

In other words, we're not going to have it any better off than those who have died, because, verse 16:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

So he's describing the *parousia* of Jesus. And notice here, does this sound like a secret rapture? We've got the archangel's call, the cry of command, and the trumpet of God. This is not like you'll see in those rapture movies where they're flying on an airplane and all of a sudden half of the airplane quietly just disappears because they've been raptured.

The rapture doctrine proposes a secret coming of Jesus to gather his true believers. What Paul is talking about here is a public coming of Jesus at the end of time that coincides with the resurrection of the dead—not the tribulation, but the resurrection of the dead. And he's saying when that happens, those who are dead in Christ—in other words, the believers who have died—they will rise first. So they're not going to actually lose out. They're actually going to be, in a sense, ahead of us. They will rise first and...

...then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...

So pause here. What is Paul getting at? The whole driving force behind his words here is the anxiety of the Thessalonians over whether their dead brothers and sisters in Christ are going to lose their share in salvation...they're going to lose their share in the resurrection. And Paul is saying, no, they won't, because here is what's going to happen. When Christ comes back, the dead in Christ will rise first, and then we will be gathered with them to meet Christ in the air.

So you can imagine this: Christ coming down from Heaven with the saints and then the saints on Earth being called up to meet Christ and His saints together. So it's like a grand ingathering of all the elect of God, both the dead and the living, that will take place at the end of time. And the reason you know it's the end of time and not this secret rapture (which the Bible never talks about) is that Paul himself says:

And the dead in Christ will rise first... (1 Thessalonians 4:16b)

So he's talking about two events: the second coming and the resurrection of the dead. He's *not* talking about a secret coming and the disappearance of true believers. He's talking about the final coming and the resurrection of all the dead in Christ. And he says:

...and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

So the point of Paul's exhortation here—the point of Paul's eschatology—is to give the Thessalonians comfort in the face of death. And this is easy to understand. If you look at the prophecies of Jesus in the Gospels, you can walk away from those prophecies—He's very clear. You don't know when the second coming is going to take place, so get ready. It's near.

I am coming soon... (Revelation 3:11a)

..you'll see in the book of Revelation. How soon? That remains a mystery. So in the first generation of the Church, there was this expectation—as we'll see when we come to the 1 Thessalonians 5—that because we don't know the day or hour, Christ could come at any moment. And therefore, He could come soon. So with that imminent expectation, when the first generation of Christians began to die, there were some people who were troubled by that and thought, “Wait, something is wrong here. Something's gone amiss. What's going to happen to them? What will be the fate of the dead?”

That was something that had to be clarified by apostles like Paul who said the dead who are with Christ, who are in Christ and with Him will rise again, and we will be gathered together. They're not going to miss out on salvation.

Now, what's fascinating to me about this passage is if you want a framework for understanding Paul's description of the *parousia* here, you should actually (surprise, surprise) go back to the Old Testament. Because if you look in the book of Exodus 19,:16-20, Paul seems to actually be getting some of the images that he

uses to describe the second coming from the account of God coming down from Heaven on Mount Sinai...in the book Exodus chapter 19. So I'll just give you a few of the parallels here. You can read it for yourself. But in Exodus 19, for example, it says that the Lord descends upon Mount Sinai when the people of Israel are gathered there. And the same thing Paul says—Jesus descends from Heaven.

Second, when the Lord comes down on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus, He comes down in a fiery cloud. It's the glory cloud of the *shekinah*. Well, when in 1 Thessalonians when Jesus descends from Heaven, Paul says that the saints are caught up together with Him in the clouds. Most people think of it like, "Was it a cirrus cloud or a cumulus cloud?" Well, it's the glory cloud. It's a supernatural cloud of Christ coming in glory.

Third, when God comes down in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus, he comes down to the sound of a trumpet. And Paul says the same thing. When Jesus comes in the *parousia*, it's at the sound of the trumpet of God, at the trumpet of the archangels. So the trumpet is a way of announcing God. So it's another clue that Paul doesn't think that Jesus is just human; He also thinks that He's divine.

And then finally—and this is important—just as the twelve tribes, the young representatives of the tribes...you might remember in the book of Exodus, they go up the mountain to meet God in the cloud. So too, Paul tells the Thessalonians, we will be caught up together with Him in the cloud to be with the Lord forever. So in effect, Paul is describing the second coming—the *parousia* of Christ—as a new Sinai. It's a new day of judgement where God not only comes down from Heaven but His chosen people are caught up to meet Him. They rise—they ascend, so to speak—to meet Him at the in-between place, the top of the mountain on Mount Sinai. And that's what Paul is describing here in the letter to the Thessalonians.

So very important text about eschatology and also crucial to recognize here that if you read any of the Church Fathers, they don't interpret this text as referring to some secret rapture that takes place before the Great Tribulation. They interpret this text as a description of the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

And you don't have to take my word for it. You can just listen to St. Thomas Aquinas. In his famous *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote this:

[W]hen Paul says, “and the dead,” he mentions *the order that the resurrection will follow*. In doing so, he makes three points. First, he treats *the resurrection of the dead*. Second, he considers *the meeting of the living with Christ*, at “then we who are alive”; finally, he refers to *the happiness of the saints with Christ*, at “and so we shall be always.” Because of these words, some people believed that the last people alive would never die... But only the contrary, “we shall all indeed rise” (1 Cor 15:51). “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22)... And so I say that some shall be alive at the time when Christ shall come for judgment, but in that moment they shall die and immediately afterwards they will rise.²

Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, paragraph 100. So notice, Thomas goes a little bit further, because one of the things that people wondered about as they were reading Paul's words is when he says:

...we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up...

...are they going to just be caught up in the clouds? Will they die and rise again? What does Paul mean here? And Thomas basically says if you look at other places in Paul—especially 1 Corinthians 15—there he clarifies that at the very last moment, those who happen to be alive at the second coming who are believers, will in fact experience the resurrection, but in their own way. They will be transformed in a moment...

...in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

So there's going to be this universal entry into the glory of the resurrection that even those who are alive in the last days will experience. So in other words, in

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians* no. 100; trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P.

a nutshell, everyone (whether you die before the end of time or you die at the end of time) is going to have the same ultimate fate if you are in Christ—death, resurrection, and then glorification with Christ forever and ever...being with Christ and happy with Him for all time.

...we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:17b-18)

And in closing...it dawned on me as I was working through this, as a side note. Some people will say from this text, “Aha, look, Paul taught that he would be alive when Jesus came back”—that he set a timeline for the second coming. Well, as we’ll see when we get to 1 Thessalonians 5 in the final section from Paul’s letter that the Church gives us, that’s not true. You can only say that by taking Paul’s words out of context. Because as soon as he makes this statement about the resurrection, he’s going to go on to clarify that we don’t know the day or hour.

...that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

And we’ll look at that a little bit later. But suffice it to say for now, in that first generation of the apostles, Paul—following Jesus Himself—teaches both that the second coming is near but that we don’t know the day or hour. So the burden and the purpose of every Christian is to be ready for that *parousia*, to be ready.

Here his point is not to set a timeline or to make any kind of positive assertion about whether or not he will be alive at the time of the resurrection. His point is to comfort the Thessalonians and saying, whether you’re dead or alive, we’re all going to share in the same glory of the resurrection at the *parousia* of Jesus Christ.