Reflection for the Thirty Second Sunday of the Year

November is a month when we are mindful of our dead. We commemorate and pray for them. We might visit their graves or light candles in their memory. And in being mindful of our dead we are in touch with our own grief, loss and separation. In our second reading today St Paul writes to console the Christians of Thessalonica who acutely feel the loss of some of their community and despair that they will not be able to share with them in Christ's return in glory and his victory over death. His words are an early lesson on how Christians should respond to death.

Thessalonica is a port city on the northern coast of Greece. Paul had visited it on his second missionary journey around AD50. There, over four weeks, he built up a small Christian community from some of the Jews he encountered in the synagogue, *"a great many devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women."* At the heart of his instruction to them was that the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus extended the hope of eternal life to those who believed in him. However, his time in Thessalonica was cut short when, after only four weeks, he was driven out of town by some of the Jews who were jealous and who *"took some wicked men of the rabble, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar."* Paul and his companion Silas had to be sent away by night to Berea,[1] a city further down the coast.

He hadn't been gone long when word reached him that the community he had left behind in Thessalonica were grieving because some of their members had died and they were concerned that these would miss out on eternal life because they had died before Jesus had returned in glory. To help them understand that death did not cut them off from the love of Christ, Paul wrote to them immediately and today we have in our second reading his instructions about how Christians should deal with death. *"We do not want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."* Paul is not suggesting that they should not grieve, or that grief is wrong. Rather they should not grief as if they had *"no hope."* Hope is the light facing down the darkness of death. Hope which is rooted in our belief *"that Jesus died and rose again"* and that *"through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."* The picture which Paul then paints with his words goes on to inform our understanding of the resurrection from the dead. *"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"* – the famous last trump – *"and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."* So, those who have died are in no way disadvantaged and, living or dead, we will all be reunited in the communion of saints around God's throne.

Grief and loss are the price we pray for love, but for Christians they are not without hope. As we remember our dead, we should be encouraged by the words of St Paul.

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[1] Acts 17