

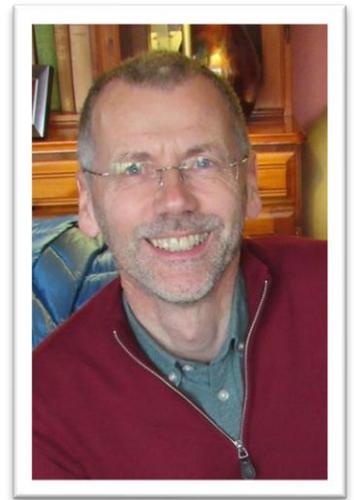
Reflection for 12th July 'Dying in Christ'

Rev Roger Smith

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11

'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 ... For 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. Then 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.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.' (1 Thess. 4:13,16-18 NRSV)



I find it fascinating to look through the obituaries in my daily newspaper. Celebrities such as politicians, scientists, artists, musicians can get a full page – today's it's a TV actress and singer I've never heard of. On the next page there are shorter notices sent in by readers – today a man who was a leading advocate of sign language and a woman who came to this country from Berlin aged 14 on Kindertransport, was later a Quaker peace activist in communist East Germany and retired to Menston! And she packed a lot more into her 95 years of life.

The Thessalonian Christians, who suffered violent persecution, were perturbed about people dying before the Lord's return. St. Paul seeks to reassure them. Of course death is disturbing but what is it that hits us hardest?

As I write this I'm preparing to conduct the funeral of a lady who died just a few days before her 100th birthday. Naturally there's sadness for her family and all who knew her but what they want to do is celebrate a wonderful life including 45 years as a doctor in Leeds.

By contrast, in this current coronavirus crisis, we sense that lives are being lost too early. MHA, like many care agencies, has been hit hard. Their chief executive has highlighting statistics suggesting that people dying from COVID-19 would otherwise have expected another 7 or 8 years of life. I find that disturbing.

And today it became personal. I heard that my cousin Mary, who has been receiving cancer treatment, contracted coronavirus and sadly has died. I think of her as full of life, married with two daughters, she'd been a primary school teacher for many years and now she has died at the age of 66. Death like this is disturbing.

I'm quite sure that St. Paul's words to the Thessalonian Christians spoke powerfully to them and reassured them. We may picture things differently. I don't find the image of being 'caught up in the clouds together' particularly helpful.

In these time of restricted numbers at funerals, a powerful image is people standing on the cortege route to pay their respects, the living and the dead held together in solidarity. How do you picture our unity with those who have gone before us?

New images, same message: every life completed - however long or short, public or private, full or empty - is caught up in the loving purposes of God that we see in Jesus for ever.