

4. September 2023

The Return of the Lord

1 Thess 4:13-18

Brethren, we would not have you ignorant, 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.

In early Christianity - we see it here in the Thessalonian community - there was evidently an expectation that the Lord would soon return for the final judgement. The whole of life was therefore to be directed towards His return, for this certainty gives vigilance and attention to our whole existence.

The same is true if we live in the awareness of the death that awaits us; if we "integrate" death into our life, since for us Christians it means the final encounter with the Lord. Such an attitude will make us prudent, so that we make use of the time given to us to serve the Kingdom of God and thus be prepared for our meeting with the Lord at the hour of our death.

As St Paul tells us in this passage, we are not ignorant of death, as are those who have no hope. By the latter he means those who do not believe, for whom death remains something incomprehensible, which, in its fury and terror, suddenly snatches away life and leaves others bewildered, as is especially the case when loved ones die.

For non-believers, the question of the afterlife remains unanswered. Thus, this question is obscure to them and cannot give them comfort. This shows us how important it is to proclaim to people also the so-called "afterlife", i.e. the ultimate

human realities, so that they may have hope and learn to understand life and death from the perspective of faith. Even today there are many non-believers, and not a few of them have misconceptions about death and the hereafter, so that they cannot have true hope!

Today's reading speaks of the "rapture" of the faithful who are still in this world when the Lord returns. The words of the Apostle seem to indicate that he himself believed that he would witness the return of Jesus: *"we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep"*.

But although at certain times the faithful believed that His Second Coming was imminent, and millenarian movements arose, the truth is that this event has not yet come. But this should not confuse us, for the Lord has expressly told us: *"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only"* (Mt 24:36). It is up to us to interpret correctly the signs of the times, the signs that precede His return.

And if the Lord has not yet returned, this is not a delay, as St Peter says in his Letter: *"The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"* (2 Pe 3:9).

The Lord's intention, then, is to save people and to offer the possibility of salvation to all future generations. People need to hear the proclamation of the glory of eternal life, where eternal joy awaits us in union with God and His own. But at the same time they must know that there is an eternity of separation from God, which is a torment for the soul.

Thanks to faith in Christ, the great questions of life and death have been given a real answer. As the Lord died and rose again, so it will be with us. We do not know whether we will be among those still in this world when the Lord returns in glory, but that is not the important thing! What is important is that we heed the following words of the Apostle Paul to Titus, so that the Lord will find us ready:

"For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus"

Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Tit 2:11-14).