**A new, eternal, heavenly body** 28/11/21 dkm

Read: John 14, 2Corinthians 5

Text: 2Corinthians 5:1-5

Psalms: 108:1-7a, 49:12-20, 73:21-28, 134a

Deciding on a title for a sermon is always a challenge- as is deciding on sermon subheadings. I read the passage many times asking the Holy Spirit to help me, and also look into commentaries. One commentator gives this passage the title, ‘The Christian Hope’, which is fine as long as we understand the word ‘hope’ in the biblical sense. The Christian hope is a matter of certainty about things not seen, and about the future; not to be confused with a worldly hope, which has no certainty. The apostle Paul could not be certain of people’s response to the gospel, or their response to him as a preacher of the gospel; although he could be almost certain that some Jews would reject the gospel and attack him. But he was certain of what he had seen and heard on the Damascus road, and indeed of all the promises found in the Scriptures.

In the city of Corinth both Jews and Gentiles accepted the gospel, but not all turned away from the immoral and idolatrous lives they had previously practiced. They did not flee sexual immorality or flee idolatry as the apostle taught (1Cor 6:18, 10:14). A small but vocal group in the church set out to discredit the apostle Paul and the gospel he preached. False teachers came from outside and joined this party attacking the apostle. Paul, understandably, was upset by these personal attacks, but what is not so easy to understand is the fact that he did not ‘lose heart’ or give up (4:1, 16). We might say that Paul was ‘marching to the beat of a different drummer’ than the false teachers.

Paul was compelled by the risen Christ to preach the gospel (5:14, 1Cor 9:16). Obedience to his divine calling lead to suffering and persecution wherever he went (cf. 11:22-33). Paul had a ‘thorn in the flesh’ and carried scars on his body from numerous beatings and a stoning. He was physically weak and exhausted. Yet he pressed on in the ministry. But how?

Apart from his divine calling, Paul was assured of the Lord’s presence with him. He was also assured of a new, resurrected body fit for heaven. Paul had seen the risen Jesus and he preached bodily resurrection as the great hope of believers: ‘Knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you’ (4:14).

Paul had faced death more than once in his ministry, but the prospect of death did not deter him. He knew that death was ‘gain’ for the believer (Phil 1:21). He did not dwell upon death but he did dwell upon what comes after death, namely resurrection and being in the presence of the Lord for eternity.

Here in chapter 5 Paul continues his focus upon things unseen that are eternal (4:18). He expresses his desire to put off his ‘earthly tent’ and be ‘clothed with our heavenly dwelling’. He uses two metaphors to help us understand what he is talking about: ‘a heavenly house’ and ‘a heavenly garment’. Our third subheading is, ‘Holy Spirit given by God’.

**1. Heavenly house**

Jesus spoke of his Father’s house and told his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:2). But this does not seem to be what Paul is talking about as he contrasts ‘our earthly house’ with ‘a building from God, a house… eternal in the heavens’ (5:1). He refers to, ‘our earthly house’ as ‘this tent’. Paul, as you know, was a tentmaker who knew about tents, although the apostle Peter uses the same metaphor to refer to his physical body, and to death as ‘putting off my tent’ (2Peter 1:13, 14).

Paul speaks of this tent being destroyed; he earlier spoke of ‘our outward man perishing’ (4:16). Paul, like Peter and the other apostles, often faced death for the sake of Christ; James was martyred soon after Pentecost. But Paul, like the others, was confident that he would receive another ‘tent’, in this case ‘a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens’ (5:1). The story of the three little pigs comes to mind. In this story it is the house made of straw or sticks that gets blown down while the house made of bricks could not be blown down. A tent is similarly flimsy, and lived in for a short time only.

We look after this tent, this earthly body, feeding and clothing it, and getting medical help when necessary, but ultimately it will perish. The Christian hope we spoke of is that God has prepared a new house for us to live in, an eternal house in the heavens. This may sound like the place that Jesus has prepared but the context here is that of a body in which we live. The earthly house Paul refers to is not the temple in Jerusalem or even the church- unless the following metaphor of being clothed is totally unrelated. In 1Corinthians Paul speaks of our body being the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19).

**2. Heavenly garment**

Living in a tent is not only perilous, it is also difficult. Think of a woman longing for a proper kitchen and bathroom, a more comfortable and permanent place to call home. Paul does not continue with this metaphor of a tent and ‘a house made without hands’; he switches to another metaphor, that of being ‘clothed with our dwelling which is from heaven’ (5:2) - he does return to the tent metaphor and link the two in verse 4.

Paul does not explain why we groan because of our earthly tent or clothing, probably because we all know the weakness and limitations, and indeed the temptations of the flesh. The disciples fell asleep even after Jesus told them to watch and pray because, while the spirit was willing, the flesh is weak (Mat 26:41). You may well be groaning even now because of the weakness of the flesh- maybe you are sick or tired, or maybe you are upset about something. Actually, Paul’s groaning is not so much about his present troubles, as about an intense longing to be with Christ (Phil 1:23). In Romans 8 he writes of the whole creation groaning, of us groaning as we wait for ‘the adoption, the redemption of our body’ (Rom 8:23); even the Holy Spirit who helps us is groaning (Rom 8:26).

Paul is not of course, contemplating death as an escape from his troubles in this life; nor is he looking forward to the soul being set free from within the confines of his body- a notion held by Greeks and other pagans. Even while in this body, we are set free from bondage to sin in Jesus Christ. Even while in this body, we have begun a new life; ‘the inward man being renewed day by day’ (4:16). Paul does not want to dispense with this earthly body and end up naked (5:3). He earnestly desires to be ‘further clothed’ with ‘our dwelling which is from heaven’ (5:2, 4). The ‘further clothed’ has the sense of putting on an overcoat.

This process of change he refers to as, ‘mortality being swallowed up by life’ (5:4). These words remind us of 1Corinthians 15:54 where, in referring to the resurrection body, he wrote ‘this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality’. He spoke at that time of the dead being ‘raised incorruptible’ and ‘we shall not all sleep’ (1Cor 15:51, 52). There is nothing to indicate any change in the apostle’s thinking regarding his death being before or after the return of Christ; some suggest he was now thinking he might die before Christ returns.

Do these verses have anything to tell us about an ‘intermediate state’ between death and the resurrection when Christ returns? There is certainly no teaching here, or anywhere else in the Bible, about purgatory. Nor is there anything that points to a ‘soul sleep’. Such words and such teachings are not found in the Bible. Paul’s main thought here in these verses, says one writer, ‘is not about a person’s state but about the wonder of being with Christ’.

Let us remember the words of Jesus to the penitent thief on the cross: ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43). Moreover, the words of the Shorter Catechism Q37 are in agreement with what Jesus says, and what Paul says here and later in verses 6 and 8 about being absent from the body and present with the Lord; we are either in the body or present with the Lord: ‘The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till, the resurrection’.

For Paul, the change from physical to spiritual body is instantaneous. F.F. Bruce suggests that ‘in the consciousness of the departed believer there is no interval between dissolution [of the earthly body] and investiture [with the resurrection body], however long the interval may be by the calendar of earth-based human history’. I like this suggestion because it is consistent with, if not literally, what Paul says.

**3. Holy Spirit given by God**

‘God himself has prepared us for this very thing’ (5:5). This ‘very thing’ is endowment with immortal bodies (cf. Phil 3:21). Corruption and death of human beings was not part of God’s creation. Death came because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. When death came to mankind it came to all creation. ‘The whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now’ (Rom 8:22). But God had prepared for the redemption of men and women from sin and death (Gen 3:15). He prepared for his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to be the sacrifice for sin, and in his resurrection obtain victory over death. This is the gospel, the message of the cross and the resurrection. And ‘the whole creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God’ (Rom 8:19).

God prepared, and has fulfilled, his great plan of redemption. His sending of the Holy Spirit is his final gift, a gift to all who believe. The Holy Spirit quickens dead hearts so that they believe the gospel they hear. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the hearts of all who believe. The Holy Spirit empowered the apostle Paul, and empowers us in preaching the gospel and in every ministry. As the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is, in fact, God dwelling in our hearts (John 14:23).

Some Christians focus on the Holy Spirit working signs and wonders, which he does of course, but the apostle Paul sees the Holy Spirit as the seal of God’s ownership of us, and as a guarantee of our heavenly inheritance (1:22, 5:5). In the midst of tribulation, Paul found comfort and strength in the resurrection of Christ, the firstborn from the dead, and also in the Holy Spirit, the comforter promised by Jesus and poured out on the day of Pentecost. We do not see the Holy Spirit, apart from his work in our lives and ministry, and the comfort he gives. The Spirit is among things unseen, which are eternal (4:18).

The word guarantee or pledge means a down payment, with the promise of payment in full in the future. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that our inward man is being renewed day by day, and it by the power of the Holy Spirit that our earthly bodies will be transformed so as to conform to Christ’s glorious body. We have the assurance that the Spirit, who is with us, will lead us safely into God’s presence whenever we die.