

Group Notes 4 December 2011
Coming with hope

Welcome - Ice Breaker

Do you like board games? Which one is your favourite?

Word – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-end

Verse 13 – Life is like a game of Monopoly. You go round the board a few times, you win some, you lose some: you acquire lots of stuff – money, property, ambition, hopefully you have some fun and build a relationship with other players. But sooner or later the game is over and it all goes back in the box. You can't take it with you when you go. But though we may grieve over those we lose, we still have hope!

Question 1: In the past, some Christians have been centred on death, taking it as healthy to remind people of the misery of this life so they would focus on heaven instead. Do you think this is helpful?

Verse 15 -16 - We don't know when it will all go back in the box – at our own personal death? Or when Jesus comes again? It seems that 1 Thessalonians was written soon enough after the resurrection for people to think Jesus might be back any day, but long enough after for people to be bereaved of their friends and family, through accidents and illness, persecution and old age. The writer reassures them that we will meet again and those who have died first will not be left out at Jesus' return.

Question 2: What do you think of verse 16? Do you find the appearance of Jesus, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet call, stirring? Or frightening?

Isn't it strange how many end of the world movies there have been in recent years: Climate change – *day after tomorrow*: Asteroids hitting the earth – *Armageddon*: Aliens blowing up the White House – *independence day*, *the day the earth stood still*: and of course, *2012*

Question 3: What's going on? Where does this deep unease about the future of the world come from?

Back to verse 14 – Thessalonians pins its hope of a life to come on two things. First, the fact that Jesus Christ has risen from the grave. He was seen alive by many witnesses, lots of whom laid down their lives for their testimony. People who have researched the evidence have concluded that the resurrection is the only workable explanation for the facts. We can only conclude that someone – Jesus - has come back from the dead to tell us that there is a life to come. Our faith does not rest on wishful thinking or myths and legends but on a fact. We must therefore cultivate our personal relationship with Jesus: He is our passport to our heavenly home.

Question 4: How convinced are you by the resurrection of Jesus?

Verse 15 - The second basis is God's own promise. God does not want us to be unsure whether or not we are going to go and be with Him in the future. A God of love could not want us to be in doubt whether we are going to be cut off from him for eternity. No parent would treat their child like that. Moreover God has guaranteed His promise by putting His Holy Spirit inside us (see Ephesians 1:13-14). God Himself lives within us by His Spirit – and you can't kill God!

Question 5: Why do so many people say they are unsure whether they will get to heaven?

So we have this hope that goes beyond the grave and is still there when the game is over and all the pieces go back in the box. We have seen that this hope is based on our personal relationship with Jesus and we must

therefore cultivate this relationship before anything else. Of course we are still in the game for now, we still need stuff, we can still enjoy life as God's gift to us. But we must make sure that our focus is on Jesus, that the things we surround ourselves with are our servants, not our masters, that we don't get bogged down in temporary things and lose sight of eternal things.

Question 6: So is it right for Christians to get involved in bringing hope on earth? What should we say to someone who reckons we should just focus on heaven?

Worship ideas for groups with no musicians.

The Psalms treat the coming of the Lord as a time of liberation, not of dread, and a cause of celebration, not of fear. Ask your group members to take a verse each and read Psalm 96 round in the circle as an act of worship.

Works/witness.

Is anyone in your group involved with a Christian organisation that brings hope to the community? Pray for them!

Invite friends to Christmas services at St Matthew's.