Grace Episcopal Church
Proper 27 – 24th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev Brian C Justice

Psalm 70
Wisdom 6.12-16
1 Thessalonians 4.13-18
Matthew 25.1-13

There Is No Such Thing As The Rapture

One verse in St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians has become a marvel in modern Christianity:

> 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 forever.
> (4.17)

This verse has given rise to the belief in The Rapture, which is both a theological and cultural phenomenon among Evangelical Christians.

The idea of the Rapture is a modern idea. It has no foundation in the teachings of the Apostles or the Church Fathers. It is neither proclaimed by the great Councils of the Church nor mentioned in the Creeds of the Church.

In fact, the idea of the Rapture was invented in the 1820s by John Nelson Darby, an Anglo-Irishman who left the Anglican Church and formed a separatist sect called the Plymouth Brethren.

The idea of the Rapture became established among American Fundamentalists in the early 20th century through their widespread use of the Scofield Reference Bible, a King James Version of the Bible that included extensive footnotes on "the end of the world."

More recently, the idea of the Rapture entered the popular imagination of American Evangelicals, first, in the 1970s and 1980s through the writings of Hal Lindsey (author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*) and, second, in the 1990s with the publication of *Left Behind*, a series of apocalyptic fiction novels written by Tim

LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. And, of course, the Rapture was proclaimed over the airwaves by TV Evangelists like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Jimmy Swaggart.

So, what exactly is the Rapture?

The Rapture is the idea that Evangelicals, who identify themselves as the chosen and saved people of God, will be "seized" and "snatched up" into the clouds and "taken away" to be with God while the rest of us will be left behind to suffer God's wrath in a period of doom, death, and destruction. And this is a secretive event, a snatching away of the select few before everyone else and everything else is destroyed.

The Episcopal Church – like the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and the mainstream Protestant denominations – does not teach or accept this recently invented concept of the Rapture. This concept does not belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

The Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches as well as the mainstream Protestant denominations regard the Rapture as a misreading of Scripture and a misunderstanding of the story of salvation.

Let me explain how.

In 1 Thessalonians 4.17, St Paul invokes two images common to the ancient world and to the Jewish literary tradition: the cloud and the meeting.

First, the cloud.
God's presence in the world is often symbolized in the Scriptures as a cloud. In the Book of Exodus, God leads the Israelites out of Egypt by day in a pillar of cloud to guide them. When they are camped at Mount Sinai, the mountain is wrapped "in a thick cloud" as Moses and the Israelites receive the Ten Commandments. In 1 Kings 8, when the Jewish priests dedicate the Temple in Jerusalem to God, the sanctuary is filled with a cloud of divine glory. The prophet Daniel has a vision in which the Son of Man comes "with the clouds of heaven" to rule over the earth.

Second, the meeting.
St Paul says to the people in the Thessalonian church that they will meet God. And he invokes imagery like that of the citizens going out to meet the king or the bridegroom or the wayfarer. This kind of encounter is found in Genesis (Abraham

going to meet the three travelers, 18.2), in Exodus (Aaron going to meet Moses 4.27), in Matthew (the Ten Virgins going to meet the Bridegroom, 25.1-13), in John (Martha going to meet Jesus, 11.20), and in Acts (the Christians in Rome going to meet Paul, 28.15).

The imagery of clouds always indicates God's public presence in majesty and in glory *that everyone can see*. The imagery of the people going out to meet the one who is returning always indicates the honor and dignity of a public welcome *that everyone can see.*

This is far from secrecy. St Paul is celebrating the revelation of the Kingdom of God over the whole world and the kingship of Christ who reigns in triumph and in grandeur.

St Paul is depicting Christ's victorious return to the world, not Christ's vindictive ruination of the world.

The secret Rapture misses this point entirely.

St Paul is describing embrace, not evacuation.

Why would God destroy his own creation which God himself declared to be good (Genesis 1.31)? That makes no sense.

Furthermore, the Gospels teach that God loves the world and comes to the world. God so loves the world that God gives his only Son to the world. Why would God do that if God was only going to destroy it? That makes no sense.

In Eucharistic Prayer A, we pray in thanksgiving for the love of God and for the life of Christ:

> He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself,
> in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

"A perfect sacrifice *for the whole* world." Think about what that means! God restores the whole world. God restores all things and all persons in Christ.

The view underlying Rapture theology is that the world is doomed and must be destroyed.

The view underlying Episcopalian theology is that the world is good, the world is redeemed, and the world is being and will be restored in and through and by Christ the King.

The world will come to salvation, not to annihilation.

The world, and everyone and everything in it, is loved by God. With that kind of love, no one is "left behind."

As St Paul writes, boldly and beautifully, in his letter to the Romans:

> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ...
>
> ... No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
> (8.35-39)

God is love and we *are* with God and we *will be* with God once and always and forever.

And that is why, even at the grave, even at the end of all things,
we make our song Alleluia, Alleluia.

Amen.