

In today's second reading from the first of Paul's letters, the oldest text in the New Testament, we read: "we want you to be quite certain, brothers, about those who have died, to make sure that you do not grieve about them, like the other people who have no hope." (1 Thess 4:13)

Some ancient Christian writers understood Paul to be saying here, "Don't grieve for the dead." Others, however, understood the verse to mean: "Grieve for the dead, but do so with hope." The second interpretation has won the day, after all, Jesus wept when he learned of Lazarus' death, and at the martyrdom of Stephen the *Acts of the Apostles* says that "devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him."

We grieve in hope because Christ has given death a new meaning. In the translation of our verse in our missals (*The Jerusalem Bible* translation) the deceased are described as "those who have died," but a more literal translation of the Greek "*koimoenon*," found in many other translations of this verse, refers to the deceased as "those who have fallen asleep."

Paul is not using 'sleep' as a euphemism for 'death' in order to diminish its harshness. He uses 'sleep' as a metaphor for 'death,' to convey that death is not final. And Christians soon would name burial places *koimeteria*, "sleeping places." The English word, 'cemetery' is clearly cognate with the Greek *koimeteria*.

One early Church Father, St John Chrysostom, commented that Christians appropriately called burial places "sleeping places," for "since Christ, no longer is death called death, but slumber and sleep." Thus in the Roman Canon or First Eucharistic Prayer we pray: "Remember Lord your servants who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace."

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out what is new about the Christian understanding of death when it says that death completes the process that began at Baptism: "Through Baptism, the Christian has already 'died with Christ' sacramentally, in order to live a new life; and if we die in Christ's grace, physical death completes this 'dying with Christ' and so completes our incorporation into him in his redeeming act." Thus, appropriately the Funeral Mass begins with "the recalling of Baptism."

Death is an evil. St Paul calls it the last enemy to be destroyed, so we mourn for those who have died, but we mourn with hope, for death has now a new meaning; "In death God calls us to himself." (*Catechism* 1011)

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