“Words of Encouragement”

“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

“In Flanders fields the poppies blow…”

The coming of November means that poppies reappear on the lapels and coats of Canadians across the country. This symbol of remembrance both supports the work of the Royal Canadian Legion and shows our solidarity as we honour those who gave their lives for the sake of our nation on Remembrance Day. They have a special poignancy this year, as this occasion comes so soon after the horrific events that took the lives of two soldiers on our own soil. We proudly wear these poppies of remembrance as we pray this week "for all who have labored for liberty, freedom, and justice; for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice; and those who in life and death have preserved our living.”

The poppies we wear on Remembrance Day have their origin in John McCrae’s famous poem In Flanders Fields, in which he recalls seeing “the poppies blow between the crosses, row on row, that mark our place.” In the midst of the horrors of World War 1, the poppy was one of the few signs of life in a devastated landscape. A soldier who survived the 1916 battle of Verdun described the front line as a “brown belt, a strip of murdered nature. It seems to belong to another world. Every sign of humanity has been swept away.” Yet even though there were few signs of life on this battlefield where so many lives were lost, soon rows of field poppies began to appear. The seeds of these poppies are disseminated in the wind and can lie dormant in the ground for a long time. The sight of these delicate, vibrant red flowers growing on shattered ground caught the attention of Canadian soldier John McCrae as a sign of life and hope in the midst of death and destruction; and every year, we wear poppies to symbolize our hope and to encourage one another even as we remember those who “loved and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders fields.”

We need signs of life and hope in the midst of death and despair. When we have lost a loved one, we need the comforting words of family and friends, the warm embrace of people who come to walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and even the flowers which symbolize life even as death invades our families and homes. When the news of the day brings troubling accounts of warfare, epidemic, famine, and economic troubles, we need words of assurance that all is not lost, that there is hope for a brighter and better future. When even the tasks of everyday life become difficult and we do not know how we will be able to continue life as we have known it, we need words of encouragement to assure us that in the end all will be well.

Paul’s words in his first letter to the Thessalonians are written to offer encouragement to the church in the midst of its grief so that it might recognize the hope it has and how that hope distinguishes it from others. Their faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection and the promise of his coming again are instruments of God’s power. This hope, that “through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (4:14), is the resource the Christians in Thessalonica can use to encourage and console one another so that, as Paul would later write to the Corinthians, “we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:4). 1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest of Paul’s letters in the New Testament, written to a church that at the time probably thought that Christ would come again before any of their fellow believers died. This belief, common in the earliest days of the Church, is based on their interpretation of Jesus’ promise that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” (Matthew 24:34-35). But the death of some in the church has caused them to grieve “as others who have no hope.” (4:13). The hope they have lies in their faith in Christ, through whom “God will bring with him those who have died.” Jesus’ death and resurrection inaugurate the new age and sound the death knell to the old age.
As the basis for their hope is in the death and resurrection of Christ and the promise that “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5), a second basis for the hope that Paul shares to encourage the Thessalonian Christians is in the parousia, the promise that as Christ has died and Christ is risen, Christ will come again. When our Lord comes again “in glory to judge the living and the dead,” the faithful will be “united with each other and with the Lord imminently, powerfully, gloriously, and permanently.” (Abraham Smith). Paul offers his readers a glimpse of that day when the Lord will return as a victorious Saviour to liberate his people from despair and to defeat all forces that seek to separate them from God’s eternal presence:

· “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 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.” – 4:16-17.

This union with Christ will be powerful because it will begin with “a cry of command,” an image associated with a call to arms in a military battle. Those who are left will be “caught up,” a term often used to describe the action of death itself. This union will be permanent, so that “we will be with the Lord forever.” Because the message of the Gospel he proclaims is one of trust and hope, Paul urges those who receive this message from him to in turn “encourage one another with these words.” (4:18).

· “Paul’s apocalypticism inspired hope, gave comfort, and provided challenge to the socially alienated persons of his day … Paul’s apocalyptic vision reads the present reality in the light of the future expectation.” – Smith.

As we gather in worship this morning, we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. It is, of course, a special day for Dylan James and his family, but it is also a time of celebration and reflection for us as we gather together as children of God. As we gather at the font, we are reminded that “in baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Even though we are born children of a fallen humanity, we have the assurance that in Baptism we have been “reborn children of God and made members of the Church, the Body of Christ.” This is the hope that is our inheritance as God’s children, the hope that offers us comfort and encouragement throughout all the days of our lives as “living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.”

· “[Baptism is] a grace filled water of life and a ‘bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit,’ as St. Paul says to Titus in chapter 3, ‘through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This saying is sure.’” – Small Catechism.

As we gather around the waters of Baptism this morning, we gather every Sunday in the presence of these same waters which serve as a symbol and reminder of the hope that offers us consolation and encourages us to live every day in trust and hope, no matter how dark or foreboding our circumstances might be. As the waters of baptism stand before us as a symbol of the living hope that brings us the word of encouragement, they also call us to offer these words of encouragement to one another, to be a community that seeks to console and encourage each other with the same consolation and encouragement that is ours in the Word of Life that dwells among us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

· “This newness is a gift in baptism. It is recovered each Easter in faith in the resurrection, each Lord’s Day as the sun of the new creation bursts in upon the old, with each concrete return to and recall of the faith which was baptism’s gift, and in the joy of forgiveness. Such newness moves bodily out into the world; it enters into the real world, not just some spiritual, abstract, chimerical world. How one acts then becomes decisively important – if the Name is to be known and
honoured. Faith becomes active in love; love means complete devotion to God and then, as Augustine would say, freedom to “do as you please” in His service.” – Martin Marty, *Baptism.*

As the poppies that bloomed on the battlefields of Europe were a sign of life and hope in the midst of desolation, we wear them in these days of remembrance as a symbol of consolation and encouragement even as we mourn the loss of those we have loved and look into a future filled with darkness and uncertainty. They remind us that even the greatest forces of destruction that humanity can muster cannot completely destroy the hope that is always present in God’s creation in which our Lord continues to dwell. And even after Remembrance Day passes and our poppies are placed back in our drawers, the consolation and encouragement we share in these days are ours to share at all times and in all places; for no matter what may be happening in our midst, we live in trust and hope that we are God’s children, and “neither life nor death shall every from the Lord his children sever.” Amen.