

Raymond F. Collins. *The Power of Images in Paul*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008. 296 pages. \$49.95.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

What do these words from 1 Thess. 4:16-17 mean? They are popularly taken as a simple literal description of the second coming, the resurrection of those who have died in Christ, and the "rapture" of the resurrected and of some group of still living Christians to be taken away with him to heaven. One of the things missing from this popular interpretation is the image Paul's words must have evoked in the minds of those to whom he was writing. It is an image foreign to the experience of people living in a democratic culture. In the first-century culture of emperors and kings, powerful lords, and victorious generals, the great person would arrive at a city with a military escort and be announced by a herald and a trumpet blast; and the citizens would go out to meet him, to hail him as "Savior" and hope to receive some benefaction, perhaps some of the booty from a successful war. When the Thessalonian recipients of this letter heard these words, those words may well have summoned up an actual experience of such a visitation by some powerful human personage to their own city. Now Paul uses that experience to paint the picture of the coming of the Risen Jesus from heaven as Lord, weaving into it the stock apocalyptic motifs of the archangel, the trumpet blast, and clouds as heavenly vehicles.

The other thing missing from the popular modern reading of these words is the Thessalonian Christian expectation and point of concern that Paul seems to be addressing. The larger context suggests that they were eagerly desiring and expecting the presence, arrival (*parousia*) of the Resurrected Jesus, so that they could be *with him*. *Being with Jesus* was their most potent desire (4:17). They had thought that this would happen any minute, before any of their number would die! But some had "fallen asleep." Paul could presumably have assured them that when Jesus comes, God will bring with this Jesus, who died and rose, those of their number who have died, since God will raise them as he raised Jesus (4:14). But Paul gives added power to his assurance by expanding this initial statement into a vivid drama in which he gives those who have "fallen asleep" a principle role. Paul is summoning up their experience of all the excitement and drama of a great person visiting their city and repainting their memory of it in terms of the arrival of Jesus from heaven and making graphic the role of both those who have fallen asleep and those who are left in that image. The power of the image comes from the emotional power of the Thessalonians' own similar experience and their ability to project it into their imaginings about the coming of the Lord Jesus. (28-30)

Paul's use of metaphor in this one brief passage of 1 Thessalonians exemplifies Paul's sense for the power of metaphor throughout his letters. Collins has written essentially a commentary on the letters of Paul widely regarded as authentic. He is attentive to metaphors that dominate a particular letter, often in distinction from other letters, pointing out their pattern through the letter. He then reads through the letter, identifying the metaphors as they appear, and expounding upon their significance both in relation to the context of what Paul is saying and of their source in experience and role in other Jewish and non-Jewish literature of the time. At the end of the book, he sums up by taking each metaphor Paul employs and looking through the letters synchronically to see where each appears and how Paul uses it.

This book will surprise many readers. Much of Paul's language has become so familiar or so foreign that we are unable even to recognize that he is speaking in metaphor. But it is our ears that have become dull, not Paul's language. Collins unstops our ears so that we can hear sharply and distinctly in Paul's words the great variety and many rich combinations of instruments he brings together to produce different musical colors and to generate overtones and reverberations. Suddenly the world of Paul's letters is bright, clear, and technicolor instead of dull and lifeless.

We might hope that by rediscovering in Paul a great tutor in the use of metaphor, we as preachers may be inspired to develop further our own use of metaphor. We may start simply by trying to restore Paul's own metaphors to clarity and vividness for our own listeners. This could easily carry over into being attentive to them in other Biblical texts. Some of these metaphors may no longer work, because, like the metaphor of the great public figure making a visitation to an ancient city, this is not part of our experience. Paul's use of a metaphor may stimulate us to find a similar metaphor from our own culture that can have a similar rhetorical impact. But the human imagination is not limited to a person's own experience. We are also fascinated by worlds unlike our own, such as the strange world of the Thessalonians. Perhaps we can tell the story of their world in such a way that, instead of adapting Paul's language to our world, we begin to hear Paul's letter to them as though we lived in their world.

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