

Sunday 4th October 2020

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10 (Steadfast Hope)

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Betty Friend (and read by Sue Miller).

Good morning and welcome to St Johns online reflection. Today, we will be focusing on 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10. Firstly, the prayers written by Betty and read by Sue.

Let us pray:

Our loving heavenly Father, in the difficult times, we thank you for your many blessings, the wonders of your creation and the knowledge that you love us. Help us to look after your creation and to extend your love to those we come into contact with, even although sometimes this is not easy.

We are sorry when we do not do the things you would want or when we do or say things which may hurt others. Forgive us and steer us in your path.

We pray for the areas of the world where there is so much hatred and fighting, especially those about which little is known, as in Ukraine and Azerbaijan. We pray that you will soften the hearts of the men of war so that they may "turn their spears into ploughshares." We ask your mercy on those innocent people caught up in the fighting, those being killed, those hungry, lacking medical help, grieving for loved ones and being displaced from their homes. Please provide for those organisations such as Release International, Open Doors, Klass, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and others bringing support for those in prison and their families. Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who seek to bring your gospel to those who have not heard it, or need support in their new faith, particularly those Muslim background believers. We pray especially for the Day family in Thailand. We ask you to strengthen our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world who suffer for their faith in you. Give them comfort and courage as they stand up for you.

Please bless those who preach the gospel and stand up for Christian values in this country. Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the election of a new president soon to be held in America, which is mired in accusations and ill will. Lord have your way in that election. Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our country where the pandemic seems to be spreading, although the death rate remains comparatively low. This of course does not help those who have lost loved ones, or those suffering with long Covid. Comfort those who are grieving and heal

those who are suffering. Give our politicians, both national and local, a clear direction of how they should deal with this crisis, in accordance with your will. We are sad that there is still so much violence in our country and pray for our emergency services. We pray especially for the family, friends and colleagues of Matt Ratana, the police officer murdered recently in Croydon. Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer.**

We ask your blessing and guidance as we here at St. John's move towards appointing a new vicar. We thank you for the work of CAP and the dedication of Rachel, Lin and Gareth as they seek to release people from crippling debt. We also thank you for the provision of the food bank and for Ian who arranges distribution to the school.

We pray for the members of our church who are suffering in body, mind or spirit. We pray for Val who is waiting for news of treatment and for John who is caring for her. For continuing healing of Lorraine's shoulder, for Tom and for Emma, who is suffering with more practical problems. At this time, we pray for your strength and comfort for Tony, whose wife Carol died last week in St. Christopher's hospice. We thank you for the dedication of all the staff there.

Let us take a moment to bring to God those known to us who need His comfort or healing.

We pray for the Annual Church Meeting on 18th October. Prepare those who are thinking of standing for office during what is going to be a busy time ahead. We thank you for those who have served during the last year during the interregnum, especially the PCC and our church wardens, Ian and Steve, Sue who has kept us wonderfully up to date and Andrew handling the finances. Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer.**

Finally, we pray for ourselves, that you will bless us and keep us faithful, praising and close to you.

Merciful Father accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And now let us join together in saying the prayer that Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Reading

Our reading today is taken from 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1 verses 1-10 - New International Version (NIV)

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

²We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Talk

No church is perfect, but there is such a thing as a 'model church', and the Thessalonian church was one such example.

In today's reading Paul is writing to the Thessalonians some months after he, Silas and Timothy had visited Thessalonica and planted the first Christian church there somewhere around A.D.50. Thessalonica, a seaport in northern Greece, was the capital and largest city (approx. 200,000 population) of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was also one of the wealthiest and most flourishing trade centres in the Roman Empire. Recognised as a free city, Thessalonica was allowed self-rule and was exempt from most of the restrictions placed by Rome on other cities in the empire, and there were also many pagan religions.

Paul asked Timothy to return to Thessalonica to see how the new believers were doing and Timothy returned to Paul with good news that they were remaining firm in their faith and were unified. It was after Timothy's return that Paul wrote this letter to answer questions they had and to commend them on their faithfulness to Christ. So what actually happened for Thessalonica to become a model church? As we unpack the verses we read this morning, we will see what the Thessalonians did as a Christian community and how they did it.

When Paul preached, usually he would begin in the Jewish synagogue or place of prayer, but this time it seems that most of the people who came to believe the message were non-Jews. This gave two initial barriers, the message itself – understanding that a man who was dead then came to life again, and that it was a Jewish message. Yet, some in Thessalonica, as in most places Paul went found that something strange had happened to them when they listened to his message of the gospel, it was a power that gripped them, the Holy Spirit. In Verse 5 this is explained 'because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.' We know it is not enough to live out the Christian life; there is also a time to speak and tell others about what Jesus has done, and words in themselves are not enough – we need power, the power of God who speaks through us, with the Holy Spirit bringing deep conviction to the heart of the hearer. Through the Holy Spirit, the Thessalonians would suddenly understand what Paul was saying. It would grasp their hearts and minds. Whenever the bible is heard and obeyed lives are changed. Christianity is more than a collection of interesting facts; it is the power of God to everyone who believes. When we tell others about Christ we are to depend on the Holy Spirit to open their eyes. It is God's power, not our skill in persuading- that changes people. The Holy Spirit not only convicts people of sin, but also assures them of the truth of the Good News.

In verse 4, Paul mentions that the Thessalonians are chosen: 'For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 'Being chosen comes from the heart of God. The scripture as part of St John's vision is 1 John 4:19 'We love because God *first* loved us.' He loves us not because we are loveable, but because he loves us. It is God's sovereignty in choosing us, and then it is our human responsibility to choose to follow him. It requires that we actively confess Christ is Lord, focus on living to please him, and share the gospel with others. God's choice of us energises us to obey and to serve. Our choice of God challenges us to build lives worthy of him. A while back I wrote on a post-it note as a reminder 'Is my intention to please God?' Paul is also confident that the Thessalonians are chosen because of God's blessing on the missionaries during the mission and the authenticity of the Thessalonian's reception of the gospel and their consequent obedience. God wanted them in that part of northern Greece, to be a beacon of light to illuminate the world around. Here at St John's we have often referred to us as wanting to be a beacon in Penge. What distinguished the community from others was that it was not only located in a particular place, but 'in' a particular god – the God who is in fact the one true God, known to Jews and Christians as father, and known now in the gospel as the one who sent Jesus to be Messiah and so Lord of the

world. The Thessalonians had been a church only for a short while and yet the message of Jesus through the gospel had reached far through the work of God. Paul's response is thanksgiving for them, and encouraging them. ¹⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us.'

They shared the gospel having learned how Paul preached to them and having the Holy Spirit to guide them. In verse 6 'You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.' The Thessalonians had seen what Paul, Silos, and Timothy were preaching was true because these men had lived it. The message of salvation though welcomed with great joy brought the Thessalonians severe suffering because it led to persecution from both Jews and Gentiles. Today, some may think pain is the exception in the Christian Life, but we know we are not exempt from suffering. We live in a world where there is sin so even believers suffer, but firstly, we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus also suffered. He understands our fears, our weaknesses and our disappointments, and secondly, He has promised never to leave us, and he intercedes on our behalf. In times of pain, persecution, or suffering; we can trust confidently in Christ, and we can share this hope with those who do not know Christ, those who are lost, lonely, suffering from addiction who are looking for some thing/someone who cares..... In the midst of trials our security is in God. ...from the Father and the Son every church derives its life, strength and stability.

In the Thessalonian's witnessing, they were sharing both the good news about Jesus and the impact of that good news on their lives. The example of this is in verse 9 'They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God'. By turning away from idols the Thessalonian church differentiated itself from paganism; by proclaiming its allegiance to Jesus as resurrected Messiah, Lord, and Son of God. They turned from idols to Christ and hence their behaviour was consistent with and testified to the reality of their message. Following the example of Jesus they practiced what they preached. Today there are still idols or to use another word—'God substitutes' that can tempt us. Some people are consumed by selfish ambition for money, power, or fame, addictions of alcohol, drugs. Things can become idols for us when they take priority over God, when they become our number one focus, instead of God.

Earlier in the reading Paul calls out three things that can be seen as the essentials of Christian living: 1) **faith**, 2) **love** and 3) **hope**. As it says in verse 3 'We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.' After preaching Paul saw even in the short time he was with the Thessalonians these 3 things, these signs of life, each one demanding effort. If we look at each one:

Firstly, **faith**; the 'work' the Thessalonians do is a result or consequence of their faith. Faith is directed towards God. We are drawn up towards God in faith. It is the assurance that God has acted in Christ to save his people, and hence faith rests on the past. Paul is giving thanks for an active faith for faith is something you have to work at. It is not a 'work' in the sense of a 'work of the law' done to earn favour with God, but a work of love, done out of gratitude for grace. It means thinking the gospel through, and bringing our minds and wills into line with it. A true faith in God leads to good works, and without works faith is dead. As Eugene Peterson shared: 'No life of faith can be lived privately. There must be overflow into the lives of others.'

Secondly, **love** is a very practical thing that also requires the kind of effort we associate with hard physical work. This labour flows from love, responding to what the Holy Spirit is doing. Love is directed to others (both within the Christian fellowship and beyond it). Love works in the present ('it is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit' Romans 5:5), and as the present expression and experience of the restored relationship between God and his people.

Thirdly, **hope** is directed towards the future, in particular the glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, in verse 10 'and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.' People sometimes ask how a loving God can also be angry – but we know in our world there is brutality and inhumanity, and, one has to say that a good and loving God must be angry when faced with this. Whilst wrath will come, Jesus himself will deliver his people from it. So hope is the confidence that 'he who began a good work...will carry it on to completion and that the future, therefore holds not 'wrath for us, but....salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ'. The Thessalonian endurance or steadfastness came from hope. A true hope looks expectantly for the Lord's return, leads to endurance and courage in the face of opposition.

The type of community that the Thessalonian church demonstrated could be summarised as follows: It was a community rooted in God's grace, love and election, a community committed to Jesus Christ, a community empowered by the Holy Spirit, a community that bore witness to the gospel, a community characterised by faith, love and hope, and a community clearly differentiated from other religions.

As we reflect on what this means for us, we know that Paul's vision of the church is its God-centredness. It is by the gospel that the church exists, and by the church that the gospel spreads – each serves the other. As with the Thessalonians, the gospel came to them, they welcomed the message, they received it and they passed it on. This sequence is God's continuing purpose throughout the world. The Church that receives the gospel is to pass it on and at the same time must embody it – in our life of faith, love, joy, peace, righteousness, and hope.

As we close, if we look again at the last verse where Paul emphasised Christ's second coming. Because the Thessalonian church was being persecuted, he encouraged them

to look forward to the deliverance that Christ would bring. A believer's hope is in the return of Jesus. Our perspective on life remains incomplete without this hope. Just as surely as Christ was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, he will return. Waiting for Jesus involves a work, labour and endurance but it is all inspired by faith, love and hope. Our faith looks back to Christ's first coming and it inspires our work. Our hope looks forward to Christ's second coming and brings endurance. And love is the atmosphere of our present lives. Moved by love we look around to the needs of others in our community in Penge and witness to Christ's coming.

Glen Scriviner who wrote daily readings on New Testament describes it this way:

"Remember Jesus is your rescuer, who saved you from the coming wrath. Remember how he stepped in between you and hell and bore the brunt of the fiery blast so that you were kept safe eternally. Remember God raised him, immortal, from the grave. And remember he is coming again from heaven. Just as he ascended, so he shall descend, to raise the world like he was raised, to set things straight forevermore."

Let us pray:

God grant that our witness may be evidently characterized by truth, assurance and power; through your word, conviction, and the Holy Spirit, and that like Paul we may be able to appeal to others to testify to it.

Amen

Closing Prayer (Roman- 15:13)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen