

Sunday 18th October 2020

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5 (You are our glory and joy)

Talk by Russ Jones, Prayers by Margaret Davies

Welcome to this morning's service. To help us prepare as we come together in God's presence this morning, here are some words that Paul wrote to the church in Colossae which chime with his words in the passage we'll hear later from 1 Thessalonians, words of encouragement for us. *"Though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. So, then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness."*

Let us have a time of confession together.

Confession

Lord Jesus, we are sorry
for all the wrong things we have done,
the wrong things we have said,
the wrong in our hearts:
please forgive us
and help us to live as you want us to.

Amen.

Now Margaret will lead us in our intercessions.

Prayers

Let's pray:-

Our Father God, you ask us in everything to bring our prayers to you with thanks and praise. Today, we praise you for the many blessings we have. For our life, health, families, homes, money to live by enjoying food, clothing and needs. We thank you too for our friends and our church fellowship even though contact is not face to face at present.

In the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour we bring our prayers to you for those who do not have those blessings at present. Our world is changed beyond recognition by this pandemic, so we ask you for the communities struggling to recover economically, where mental health is fragile and lives are disrupted, we pray for your peace, your renewal and your new beginnings. May you work through those responsible in governments, medical and scientific organisations to work in unity to bring progress and restoration to everyone affected.

Almighty God, our amazing creator who also knows each individual, we thank you for our church fellowship, praying especially today for our annual meeting to follow. May we hear reports with understanding and may your will be done in the appointments and decisions. Bless our wardens, treasurer and the church council members and leaders. We pray for the

future vision merging with Holy Trinity. Please guide both councils to seek your will for our future leader and the negotiations. May you be preparing the right person now to obey your call. Bless our witness to Jesus through the Christians Against Poverty centre, the food banks, Living Well, the church school and eventual reopening of in-church activities and services.

Lord God, we pray too for your mission of spreading the Christian Gospel in our world. Especially we pray for Jason and Tracey Day and family working in Thailand. They ask us to pray against the selling and trafficking of children when many families can't afford to keep them at this time. Please bless them and all other Christian work in war torn and troubled countries. May your Spirit, Lord, be bringing peace and faith and love in knowledge of you.

Heavenly Father, we bring to you in prayer those who are suffering in mind, body or spirit, we pray for healing, strength and assurance of your love and protection. Especially we pray for those known to us:- for Val's leg to heal and confidence to walk, For Audrey's hip operation to go well with no infection and good recovery, for Alison' sister Julia and sister-in-law Sue, for Yvette's sister, for Lorraine's shoulder all to heal, for Tony and others who are bereaved to be comforted, for Anthony preparing to join the community and for Emma, Jimmy and Alfie to resolve difficult situations, and for strength for Keith and Barbara. Now a pause to pray for anyone you know or I may have left out.

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

Amen.

Now I'll read today's passage which is **1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5**

¹⁷ But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. ¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹ For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

3 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ² We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.

Talk

I really wish I could be with you. Yes, I'm talking to you, members of St John's, because we've all been kept apart for months. I've been away from you in person, but not in thought.

In today's passage Paul said the same things I've just said, to the church in Thessalonica: 'I really wish I could be with you. I think about you fondly'. He'd been forced to leave that city suddenly, after a brief stay with the church there, and you can read the story at the beginning of Acts chapter 17. These new Christians had been left alone facing hostility, and this is why Paul wrote this letter, to encourage them to be steadfast in faith when they were facing persecution. We aren't facing persecution personally but we may feel lonely in our homes, just as the Thessalonian Christians felt lonely without Paul. He felt 'torn away' from them, the word for 'torn away' literally meaning 'orphaned', because he sees his family in Christ as his children. He is filled with 'intense longing' to see them again.

Moving on from the first verse, we see that his attempts to return, and there were several such attempts, were thwarted by circumstances which he attributed to Satan. Satan's main weapon is lying, and his goal is to divide. Then it was to keep Paul from his church family, and now it would be to keep us apart from each other's support, and so, the real purpose, more easily kept apart from God. We had a picture of that in the story of the Garden of Eden, when Eve was tempted by lies when she was separated from Adam. It would be natural for Paul to feel downcast when he couldn't get back to Thessalonica, but he didn't look back. He lived out a part of Jesus' teaching that sounds strange and challenging at first: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'. If we look back, we can see the things that have gone wrong and be filled with regret and sorrow. Paul looked ahead and rejoiced. For everyone here, because we are Christians, the best is yet to come. Looking by faith, trusting by faith, Paul saw his Thessalonian friends in glory, 'in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

When we are tested by troubles, we have to take the long view of things, responding to what we know God will do in the future. Jesus will return in triumph and power. Paul knew he would be rewarded. We know the same, and just as Paul had encouraged the faith of his friends, so can we, even when we're apart. 'You are our glory and joy' he says in verse 20. Yes, that's you, the people of St John's. God is the same eternally; we are living in the same faith as Paul, with the same promises and hope. It is ancient, but it is always new. Remember the key verse from Isaiah in our summer series: 'Forget the former things; don't dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!', and the constancy of Paul's message in line with gospel truths. For example, in the first verse of the passage that Laura preached on two weeks ago, he wrote 'Jesus Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord'.

When Jesus comes, he will bring 'the crown in which we will glory', but this isn't a king or queen's crown; the word meant a laurel wreath, like the ones given to winners of races. We, like Paul, are like athletes in a marathon, and we might need to be carried some of the way, but we will receive the promised prize. But what is that 'crown', what is the sign of our own

triumph going to be? Paul tells us clearly: 'what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy'.

Paul writes 'we' and 'our' in this letter, perhaps because he is describing his friends Silas and Timothy's feelings as well as his own. I don't think he was suffering from royal pretensions, using the royal 'we'. One effect of using the plurals 'we' and 'our' is that when his letter was read out in the churches in Thessalonica, all the listeners would realise Paul's hopes applied to them too, just as I have done here, asking you to be with Paul, and see that every time he writes 'we' it means you and me, us, each person of St John's church and of the church throughout the world.

This is all part of the nature of Christian humility. We can't say 'Look at all the glory I'm entitled to, all the Christians I've made.' Firstly, Jesus makes Christians. Also, we have nothing in ourselves, no ability or resource to offer and show off to God; God gave us all those things anyway. Our crown is other people whom we've encouraged in faith.

Eventually Paul couldn't put up with any more separation from the Thessalonians because he felt such love for the believers. He couldn't abandon them and he wasn't just an evangelist. He was a dedicated shepherd who cared for his flock, so he sent Timothy back to them while he had to stay in Athens on his own. Timothy was a trouble shooter in the early church, who had gone to Corinth when there were problems there and was probably sent to Philippi as well. We are all praying about our new vicar and hoping someone will come fairly soon to us, so it's worth having a look at Timothy's character to help us understand what makes a great minister. The description of him here is 'our brother and God's fellow-worker', so he was someone who shared the same beliefs and experiences that other Christians had. He spread the gospel of Christ, and had served in various churches, especially where people needed help in establishing new Christians. He was a fellow-worker with God, so he didn't work in a showy way – he was a team player who realised that God worked through him to accomplish the growth of faith. He was also a fellow-worker with other believers. He journeyed widely as the early church needed him, just as our future vicar will be asked to make a new home among us as part of his journey as God's servant. We have quite a few characteristics to pray for in our next minister listed there – experienced, faithful, spreader of the gospel, keen to build up new Christians, humble fellow-worker with God, and a humble team worker among us, who sees St John's as part of a bigger picture of worldwide and historical faith.

The final verses in today's passage encourage us when we face unsettling trials. Timothy was sent to 'strengthen and encourage you in your faith' and the word translated as strengthen meant 'add a buttress to hold up a building', which gives us a picture of sticking a walloping great lump of stone onto the side of a church to hold it up while an enemy was hoping to undermine the walls. At the time the trials were persecutions but what Paul writes could apply to any kind of difficulty that 'undermines' our beliefs. What he tells us is that these trials are not accidental but that 'we were destined for them'. It isn't easy to follow the path for Christ, and there will be tempting voices that ask 'Did God really say that?', returning again to Eve in Eden for a moment, who was told she could be God of her own life. That is the message of the world. To resist, we need the building of our faith to be constantly strengthened, with the buttress that comforts and establishes. To finish, here is an assurance from John's first letter. 'This is the victory that has overcome the world, even

our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.'

Here is a prayer for us:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for each other and all the blessings that we receive from being part of our church family. We thank you for the chance to serve you. Help us to remember that our fellow-believers are our glory in your eyes. We pray that our next vicar may share Timothy's strengths of character, and that you may help that person to establish, strengthen and build up our faith. **Amen.**

A final blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord make His face upon you and be gracious to you,
the Lord turn His face towards you,
and give you peace.