

Sunday 25th October 2020

1 Thessalonians 3: 6-13 (Encouragement)

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 3: 6-13. First, Sue will read the prayers written by Betty.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for your many blessings. We are sorry that we have not always acted in a way which is pleasing to you. We have not looked after your creation. We have said or done things which have hurt others, or we have not done something we should have done. We are sorry and ask for your forgiveness.

We pray for our world, which is in a state of chaos as a result of corona virus, bad government, natural disasters and violence. We ask you to soften the heart of bad leaders that they will put the needs of their citizens before their own personal greed and lust for power. We pray for those who are suffering as a result of violence, thinking especially of those in Yemen, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nigeria.

Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our government as they face the challenges of Covid 19 and Brexit. Lord give them wisdom to deal with these things. We ask your mercy on those who have lost jobs and businesses, and those now struggling to make ends meet. We pray that there will be provision for the homeless as the winter comes on, and that no-one will go hungry.

Lord in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our community of Penge, and your people here at St. John's. With Christmas coming up, we pray that people will not take on debt during this time, and we thank you for Rachel, Lin and Gareth who are doing such good work in our CAP centre, and we thank you for the provision of the recent grant.

Lord in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

We thank you for our church wardens Ian and Steve, the P.C.C keeping the church ticking over, and Sue doing the administration during the last year. We pray for the merger of St. John's with Holy Trinity and look forward to the induction of a new vicar who will take on this task.

We pray for those in the church family in need of your continued healing: Anthony, Audrey, Val, Tony, Julia, Sue and Lorraine.

Let us take a moment to pray for those known to us who need your healing and comfort.

Lord in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

Lord we bring our concerns to you confident that you hear and answer our prayers, in Jesus name,
Amen.

Reading

Our reading today is taken from 1 Thessalonians, chapter 3 verses 6-13 - New International Version (NIV)

Timothy's Encouraging Report

⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. ⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Talk

Encouragement! How much value do you place on either the receiving or the giving of encouragement – A quote to start, by Nicky Gumbel: 'Be generous with encouragement. It is verbal sunshine. It costs nothing, it warms hearts and enriches lives.' This week we have had cause for some verbal sunshine, not least, in a week mostly of rain, but moreover during this ongoing season of challenge and difficulty living with Covid-19 in our world. How can encouragement help in these times?

In our reading today, we see Paul is writing at a time when the Thessalonians are experiencing challenges, specifically persecution due to their faith. He uses his letter as a way to encourage them, and as we unpack the verses, we will see how Paul does this

in what he writes, and how he too takes encouragement, from the Thessalonians progress.

Paul, and his co-workers, Silas and Timothy had visited Thessalonica a few months earlier where they planted the first Christian church somewhere around A.D.50. They had to leave earlier than planned and so were not able to share all they wanted to in building up this new community. Paul has not heard from them since the visit and is keen to know how they are doing. Paul cared very much for them and was concerned. As Russ spoke of last week, essentially Paul was away from his church family – he felt torn away from them and was filled with an intense longing to see them again. There were no telephones or emails to get in touch then, and so Paul asked Timothy to visit them again and see how they were. On Timothy's return he reported the Thessalonians had positive memories of Paul and his fellow missionaries and would welcome a return visit.

Whilst the distance is not as far and we do have Zoom, we too are not able to meet face to face, as we have been used to, i.e. to chat/support and encourage one another before the service and afterwards over tea/coffee. In our current circumstances we may sometimes feel lonely/isolated being apart from one another, and we have looked to other ways in reaching out to one another, whether it is through doing shopping for people, picking up the phone, emails, going for shared walks, chats/quizzes on Zoom, or even as with Paul writing a letter. I did write a letter the other day but could barely read my own handwriting – clearly out of practice! We hope also to have opportunities to support and encourage through the merger process.

Today's reading starts with Timothy's return from visiting the Thessalonians and he brings back good news to Paul. In verse 6 'But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.' Paul is very relieved to hear the news of their progress and encouraged by their faith and is further expressed in verse 7 and 8: 'Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord', (or as written in the NRSV version '*if you continue to stand firm in the Lord* - it is both an affirmation, and an explicit exhortation, 'if you continue'). Paul is deeply affected by the relationship the Thessalonians have with the Lord and he is filled with joy. It brings joy to a Christian to see another person come to faith in Christ and mature in his/her faith. Paul experienced this joy many times, and he thanked God for them, for their strong faith, and prayed for their continued growth.

We see that his joy had nothing to do with his own circumstances. He was in the middle of trouble and hard times himself. 'stress and crushing difficulties' (AMP), yet his concern, was not about his own situation, but about the effect the trials and persecution might have on the faith of the Thessalonians (v.3). To 'live' comes not from the absence of anxiety but of rejoicing in the Thessalonians continued faithfulness. Paul's joy came from their joy, which flowed out of the depth of relationship that he had

with the Thessalonians. Paul is keen to return to them. In verse 10 – ‘Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith’. Paul would like to return to them, and the Thessalonians also would like this. In verse 6 ‘He [Timothy] has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.’ Paul would like to be with them and further instruct them in their faith on things he had not had time to share last time, such as is mentioned later in chapter 4, on the second coming and the final resurrection.

Paul shows here that our joy comes from encouraging others. Perhaps we know of Christians, new in their faith or long time in faith, that have brought us joy. How might we continue to support them to grow in their faith. Likewise, we may have benefited from others ministering to us. Has someone’s guidance and faithfulness encouraged you to grow in Christ? How might you bring some word of encouragement to them, letting them know their example has supported your walk in Christ.

As we manage challenges in our day to day lives, we may ask, how do we at the same time also find strength to encourage others? It is not in our own strength, but through God’s love that he has given us. Timothy had been sent to enquire about the Thessalonians’ faith, but he reported back not only about their faith but also their love. This suggests not only had they continued their confidence in God, during the afflictions they experienced, but they also looked outwards to those around them in showing love to others. To Paul, it was evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) and of the reality of faith. In Galatians 5:6 it says, ‘For in Christ Jesus the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love’. It showed God’s power and love was at work in and through this new community in Thessalonica. In verse 12, Paul prays ‘May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you’. If we are full of God’s love, it will overflow to others. As in Paul’s example to the Thessalonians, we see it is not enough to merely be courteous to others; we must actively and persistently show love to others. For Paul, this was the full extent of proper Christian behaviour, within the church and for ‘everyone else’.

The Greek translation of the word love is ‘agape’ – meaning unconditional love, love without limitation. This is the love that God gives to us. A question to ask ourselves is - how much of the love of God is taking shape in us? In John 4:17 (MSG) it says ‘God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us.’ If we find our capacity to love is not that much, we just ask God to fill us again with his never-ending supply, so that we can then let his love spill over in refreshment to others.

Committing deeply to the lives of those around us can seem daunting and it may involve hard work. Yet, as Paul’s example shows, it is also a source of joy and celebration. It was joy ‘in the presence of God’. As Paul was praying, his heart must have been filled with joy as he thought about them. So much of Paul’s letters are filled with thanksgiving and

joy. In verse 9 'How can we thank God enough for you in return for *all* the joy we have in the presence of our God because of *you*'.

In the final few verses, 11-13, Paul ends with a blessing, a benediction, in 3 parts. Firstly, Paul prays that he can visit again the Thessalonians. In verse 11 'Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.' It is understood that this would have been possible about five years later when Paul visited Macedonia twice toward the end of his third missionary journey (reference to Acts 20). Secondly, Paul prays that the Lord may make their love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, and thirdly, in verse 13, Paul expresses concern that they persevere until Christ returns: 'May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones'. In order that we may be blameless and holy then, Paul prays that we may be inwardly strengthened now. For sanctification is a continuing process – and perfection awaits Jesus coming. Christ will gather all believers, those who have died, and those who are alive, into one united family under his rule. All believers from all times, including these Thessalonians believers, will be with Christ in his Kingdom.

Paul's prayer can serve as a guide for our own prayer life, and as author Michael Holmes illustrates it is a prayer centred around thanksgiving for and intercession on behalf of others and as Paul suggests can be followed in 4 ways:

1. Praying with Thanksgiving for God's faithfulness. When things go well this emphasises that it is due to God's grace and goodness and not our own efforts., and when things do not go well, we remember how he has been faithful in the past and will be in the future. Giving thanks can also have an effect on those for whom we are giving thanks. Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians and he lets them know he is doing so. It indicates their spiritual growth, and in thanking God, it humbles them, so no pride sets in.
2. Praying to be strengthened through loving service to others. Paul suggests the best way for the Thessalonians themselves to be strengthened is through an increase in their love for others, both inside and outside the church. This is– 'labour prompted by love'. Serving others in love – is contrary to self-centredness.
3. Praying in light of the future. Paul lived the present in the light of the future, in knowledge of the second coming of salvation and judgement. He reminds us the present is profoundly shaped by what God has done and will do. Paul prayed for others to live in light of eternity rather than the present.
4. Praying out of deep and sincere love for others. For Paul, success of the Thessalonians was his source of joy, because he genuinely loved them. His own petition was for another chance to visit them. Sometimes we may not be able to pray sincerely – it may be we hold a grudge against a person, and we are encouraged as in Mark 11:25 'if hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your father in heaven may forgive your sins'. This is exemplified by God

himself in Ephesians 4.30 – ‘Be kind and compassionate to one another, just as in Christ God forgave you’.

Paul’s prayer reminds us that every time Paul prayed, it was an acknowledgement of God’s priority over everything else; it is ‘in him’ we live and move and have our beings, and as author Tom Wright said, prayer is grounded in the life and work of God himself. In this respect, prayer becomes a means of bringing our vision and desires into line with God’s will, rather than vice versa. As we pray and enter God’s presence, our hearts are unburdened, and we see things as God sees them. ‘You will fill me with joy in your presence’ and in Psalm 16:11 - You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.

To summarise, Paul demonstrates the importance of our faith in God and our love in serving others both within our church family and those within our community. Through this and in prayer, we encourage others when they are feeling isolated, we are ourselves encouraged and, in this process, we receive joy.

Let us Pray:

Lord thank you for the joy you give us in seeing people come to Christ and in serving our community. May we increase and overflow with love, and be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of our Father.

Amen

Closing Prayer:

May the grace of God uphold you,
the peace of God surround you,
the love of God flow from you
and the strength of God protect
and bring you safely through this day.

Amen