

Theme: - The example of St Paul

Today we are celebrating, 'All Saints day', which is the day we celebrate the faith of all the saints, which includes all of us. So let us all celebrate our faith in Christ Jesus joyfully and with enthusiasm. And St Paul's faith, is an example to all of us, and his faith has made a huge difference in the world, and if you think one person can't make a difference, then as the Dalai Lama once put it, "You've never shared a bedroom, with a mosquito."

The background of the church in Thessalonica, and the problems the Thessalonians had are found in Acts chapter 17. And tells us that Thessalonica had a synagogue where St Paul used to teach or argue the Christian faith until he was driven out of the city by angry crowds of ruffians stirred up by jealous Jews, which was when he went to Berea, but the jealous Jews followed him and persecutions in Berea were not much better, and he fled to Athens.

It is believed that St Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians when he was living in Corinth, situated about 50 miles west of Athens, where he earned his living tent making as well as preaching the gospel of Christ. It is thought that Silvanus and Timothy returned to Thessalonica and delivered the letter by hand.

St Paul's abrupt departure from Thessalonica left recent converts from paganism and a few Jews, yes some Jews were also converted, to the Christian faith, see the beginning of Acts 17. These new converts had little support in amongst sometimes violent opposition, and his letter was written to give them support and encouragement as well as to defend his ministry, and those of Silvanus and Timothy, from lies and false accusations from those who had previously driven St Paul out of Thessalonica and then Berea.

To set the scene, we can see from the first 8 verses of chapter 2, just before our reading, that St Paul and his two friends were being falsely accused of deception, of using flattery, of greed, and of seeking personal glory through the gospel, and it is from those false accusations that St Paul is defending themselves in our reading.

Turning now to our short extract from St Paul's letter, in verse 9 St Paul starts his defence by asking them to remember what they already knew from personal experience, which was how they laboured and toiled, both night and day, so's not to be a burden to anyone, while they preached the gospel. Now we know that St Paul was skilled at tent making, a skill which is easily transferable to making or repairing sails for sailing ships, so being in a seaport city, I'm sure he had plenty of work in order to be able to support himself, without being a burden to other people. Now since St Paul speaks 'of how they laboured and toiled,' it may well be that Silvanus and Timothy were also helping St Paul in his work of tent making.

St Paul goes on to say, you are witnesses to the way we behaved and so too was God, who also saw all that we did. In using the word witness, St Paul is reminding them that what they witnessed has much more validity, than anything that anybody might say who wasn't actually there, and St Paul was asking them to believe what they actually saw with your own eyes.

Verse 10 clearly indicates that there was strong opposition to Christianity in Thessalonica at that time, and that the opposition took the form of trying to discredit St Paul, by suggesting that St Paul's gospel was of his own making, and that he and his two companions were profiting by it. It was those accusations which prompted St Paul to remind them of the way he, Silvanus and Timothy behaved, how pure, upright, and blameless was their conduct towards the church in Thessalonica. It was with those words, that St Paul claimed that he and his colleagues adhered to a high standard of ethical and moral behaviour toward those to whom they brought the Good News, and that the Thessalonian Christians witnessed this, and knew it to be true.

St Paul then follows it up with, "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children." By using a father/child description of their relationship, St Paul is writing of a deeper and closer understanding, of a bond that only exists between a parent and child. The fact that he is writing to them from Corinth demonstrates that parental relationship, where they will always be his children and he will always care for them and be concerned for them, and always be there for them, no matter where he is in the world.

In verse 12 St Paul wrote, "Urging and encouraging you and pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." What does, "lead a life worthy of God," mean? A person who has been accorded high status in life needs to honour that gift by living to an appropriate standard. In this instance, God has called these Thessalonian Christians "into his own Kingdom and glory," the last section of verse 12. They need to keep in mind that they are constantly in the presence of God, so they need to be at their best behaviour at all times.

St Paul is reminding them and us that we are always in the presence of God because we have been called into his own kingdom and glory, a fact that I know that I have to pay more attention to, and it is no comfort to me to believe that I am not alone in this. It disappoints me greatly when people with great influence, in whatever occupation, act corruptly or criminally, and it is doubly disappointing when a representative of the Christian faith, no matter at what level, drops below an acceptable standard of behaviour, because when it happens our Lord has been dishonoured. Whatever our jobs in life, whether we are the person who cuts the grass or the leader of industry, no matter what our job or our status, as Christians we are to do our jobs with the highest motives and integrity or we dishonour our work and those we work for.

The example of St Paul to us when he lived, worked, and preached the gospel of Christ in Thessalonica was his honesty, and his integrity, and his critics, no matter what they said or did would always stumble and fall because of St Paul's integrity.

In verse 13 St Paul changes direction, he is no longer defending his ministry but reminding them that he, Silvanus, and Timothy are constantly giving thanks for the faith that God gave the Thessalonians in Christ Jesus.

Bearing in mind that the largest majority of the Thessalonian Christians were previously pagans worshiping many gods, all of which were of their own making; to abandon them and take on just one God, was a huge cultural and life changing step to take. However, having said that I love the passage in Acts Chapter 17 starting at verse 22, where St Paul was walking through Athens, and he told the Athenians, "I went through your city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'"

That passage from Acts would suggest that there was a feeling among pagan worshipers that there was some sort of deity, which as yet they hadn't discovered, which may well eclipse all the other gods, so perhaps the people of Thessalonica were also searching for a better understanding of the spiritual life, and that the Thessalonians found it in Jesus and in St Paul's teaching. So initially the Thessalonians had to decide whether St Paul's preaching was something that he had made up, or whether it came from the true God, as St Paul claimed. And of course, if they had thought it might simply be St Paul's invention, they could not have accepted its claims on their lives, especially once they began to experience persecution which may well have come even from previous friends or indeed from members of their own families, as indeed sometimes happens even here today.

So, St Paul gives thanks that they received his preaching as the word of God, which is what it was. We all need to thank God continually for our faith and for all the things he does for us and especially giving thanks for the faith of our own families, and the Thessalonian Christians were St Paul's family, and he gives thanks continually for their faith that God gave them in Christ Jesus.

Finally, verse 13 reads, "When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word." To receive the word of God is more than just words, it's a transformation of the way we live out our lives. It reminds us that we will be living the rest of our lives in the presence of God. A cause for thanksgiving whatever our earthly circumstances, because the power of God is at work in our lives teaching and guiding us into a better way of living, and for a better life to come.

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