

The Witness of the Thessalonians by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 22nd October 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Introduction

“Well done! I’m so proud of you.” I wonder when you last heard those words said, either to someone else or maybe to you? Perhaps you said something like this to a son or daughter, wife or husband, or to a friend. I hope you can remember someone saying them to you. How did you feel when you heard this? At the very least, I expect you felt encouraged.

This is the sentiment behind the first letter of Paul to the church in Thessalonica, which we will be studying over the next few weeks. It’s been a while since we studied a letter of Paul. There’s usually quite a lot of theology in his letters, but there are also some very personal touches. We see Paul’s love for the people he is writing to, his concern that they should carry on growing in their faith, and sometimes his frustration when they are getting it wrong. I wonder what Paul would write to the church in Sandhurst if he were around today?

The story so far

We know that this is probably the first letter of Paul that has survived, and that it was almost certainly written in 50 or 51 AD, just 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We know this because of where it fits into the chronology of the Acts of the Apostles - chapter 17 to be precise, and those events can be dated because of other historical evidence about the proconsul Gallio, who features in Acts 18.

Paul had visited Thessalonica after coming from Philippi, where he and Silas (also known by his Latin name Silvanus) had been arrested, beaten and thrown into jail. Coming to Thessalonica, Paul and Silas had gone to the synagogue, as was their usual strategy, to tell their fellow-Jews that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus, that he had been crucified and resurrected, and would come again to judge the world. The leaders of the synagogue had rejected their message, but a few Jews and several God-fearing Gentiles, as well as a number of leading women, had joined Paul and formed a new church. Other Gentiles had been converted. But the leaders of the synagogue had stirred up a riot against the apostles, with the result that Paul and Silas had had to flee the city¹.

We don't know how long Paul and Silas spent in Thessalonica before their sudden departure, but it can't have been more than a few months. They left behind new believers who were full of enthusiasm for their new-found faith in Jesus, but were still infants in faith. Moreover, they faced opposition from the synagogue, and suspicion from the city authorities and the wider population, as the apostles had been accused of rebellion against the emperor, because of their message about Jesus being Lord of all.

¹ You can read all about it in Acts 17:1-9.

This letter was written many months later, probably in Corinth². Paul had been anxious about the new Christians, wondering whether they would stay strong in their faith amid all their troubles. Now his young colleague Timothy had arrived with good news that the church in Thessalonica was standing firm. Paul is overjoyed, and writes to encourage them:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.³

Pride in our church

What about us? How often do you thank God for this church? What is good about our Christian community that we should praise God for? Personally, I am very proud of St Michael's. In the time that I have lived and worked here I have seen so many examples of people putting their faith into practice by serving in the church and in the wider community. The repainting of the Seeby Hall just recently was an example of this. A small group of people planned and executed the work. New curtains have been bought. A new member of our church with architectural qualifications has volunteered to manage our spire repair project. Others have volunteered to help with the fundraising.

These are practical ways people have expressed their faith, and there are many other examples. But I have also been very proud of people who have become Christians through

² See Acts 18

³ 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 NRSV

this church, some young, others in later life, through joining courses to learn about the Christian faith. I am also proud of the people who have led courses and house groups, and those who have been willing to stand up in front of others and preach or lead services, encouraging others to find God for themselves.

Our challenges as a church

But there's no room for complacency. By and large, we are not facing opposition or persecution for our faith, as the Christians in Thessalonica were. But we face other challenges. One major one at the moment is the state of our finances: we don't get enough income to meet the cost of running our church (we had a deficit of £16 last year) – this is without thinking of repairing our building.

But more important is the challenge of the place of faith in the cultural context we are in. Our secular society treats religion as an optional extra, something to fit around other activities. We have parents who have faith and in principle would like to share it with their children, but Sundays are taken up with children's sports, dancing classes, birthday parties and other things.

Conflicts of priorities also affect adults who don't have children to look after: some who in the past have been regular attenders seem to have bought into the idea that going to church isn't something that is worth doing every Sunday. Worshipping the Creator of the universe with other Christians seems to be less important than other things we might do on a Sunday.

We face challenges in the area of sexual morality too – something which Paul also tackles in his letter to the Thessalonians. Many Christians have simply gone with the flow of changing social values, rather than wanting to know what the Bible teaches about how God wants us to conduct our relationships.

In summary, instead of the Church influencing the world with God's values, the world is influencing the Church. This is very different from the bold witness that Paul celebrates in the Thessalonian church in today's reading.

Conclusion

However, let's finish on a positive note. There is much to celebrate in our church, as we see people taking their faith seriously, seeking to grow spiritually and living their faith out by giving their time, skills and money to support the mission of the church and the needs of the wider community. Let's pray for God to inspire us all with a sense of wonder at what he has done in our lives and through Jesus, so that there may be more reasons to praise God for "works of faith, labours of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴ Amen.

⁴ After 1 Thessalonians 1:3