

Sunday 18th October 2020
Sermon by Reverend Peter Lyth

A Prayer of Praise

We praise you, Lord, for witnesses through the ages who have told your story and made you real to the next generation.

We thank you for people whose names are well known and prominent, and we thank you for those whose names are long lost in the annals of history – but who are known to you.

We praise you for all whose good Christian lives have impacted on who we are, and what we are, and where we are.

We praise you that in every generation there are witnesses who stand out, who stand up to be counted, who make a difference to the Christian path.

We praise you, Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that we have been brought by word, by deed, by action to follow you. **Amen**

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

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In the summer of 2018, whilst the England football team competed at the World Cup, an unlikely style icon was born. One of the sponsors of the team was Marks & spencer and the team's manager, Neville Southgate watched from the side-line wearing an M&S navy waistcoat. The waistcoat became a retailing phenomenon. The M&S collection Luxury Navy slim fit waistcoat (a snip at £65) sold out as waistcoat sales in general at M&S doubled. Social media led to "Waistcoat Wednesday" and the twitter hashtag #luckywaistcoat. Warwick Castle flew a waistcoat instead of a flag.

The imitation of people in the news is, of course, wider than this. Kate, Duchess of Cambridge wears various dresses by designers such as Reiss that sell out immediately after she has been seen wearing them.

There is a negative, of course, when Dominic Cummings made his infamous journey to Barnard Castle in March, it is alleged that it led to reduced compliance with the lockdown rules.

There continue to be positive role models in the news – Greta Thunberg speaking out against climate change, Malala Youfsafzai campaigning for the recognition of women's role

where they are oppressed and Marcus Rashford, the Manchester United and England footballer has campaigned against food poverty. All are people that have invited imitation.

The saying goes that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”. It is a key subject in the reading that we heard from 1 Thessalonians. The letter is thought by many to be the earliest of Paul’s letters, indeed the first written part of the New Testament. It was written by Paul probably whilst he was in Corinth in 51 AD.

The letter starts with this passage It is a passage primarily of thanksgiving. It is giving thanks to God for calling the people of Thessalonica in that church, but also for the way that they have served God, in such a way that they are an example to others, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but “every place where your faith in God has become known” – so much so that Paul has no need to speak of it. So these are literally exemplary Christians. It sets the tone of the letter as being not admonishment, but encouragement. And these are Christians who can be imitated.

So what is it that makes them so special and worthy of imitation?

Firstly, they make the Gospel known amongst the people of Thessalonica. They don’t just keep the message to themselves. If you read the book of Acts, the stirring stories there suggest that Paul and his colleagues spread the good news by making speeches on street corners and in market squares. The day-to-day reality may have been somewhat different as Paul may have taken advantage of his trade to talk to people in the workshops and in small informal groups rather than the big public settings. If that was indeed the case, then it is a reminder to us that, in the 21st Century we have many opportunities to share our faith, in social groups, (when they are allowed to meet once more) as well as workplaces and all the other places where we socially interact with others. It’s also worth remembering that this letter was written before the gospels came into being, so their knowledge of Christ was based on that which they received from Paul and his associates.

The second point is that they did not spread the Gospel solely through the medium of words. In the first instance, Paul had spread the gospel to them, “not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”. What they received was much more than a series of words for them to accept. Instead they were presented with a whole new way of living. And in turn, the Thessalonians did not just accept the idea, they lived it. They took the lives of the early evangelists and imitated them, especially that they were joyful in the face of persecution. We are not told what the form of this persecution was – but in the early church, such opposition was rife, ranging from taunts through to riots. What Paul also makes clear is that this joy in the face of hardship, something he had

together with his co-workers and that the people of the church also enjoyed, was divinely inspired.

Another point is that it is clear that what Paul regarded as evangelism is quite different from that which many regard as the case today. Often, we think of evangelism as someone preaching, then the recipient making some kind of commitment of faith. But what Paul had in mind was much more than that. It means action rather than just acceptance.

Descriptions of the early church in the book of Acts are of a community that is both exciting and attractive. Moreover, not only did the Thessalonians change, but also Paul and his co-workers changed. It was not simply a case of Paul telling the church the good news and what to believe, it was a dialogue that brought mutual understanding. Later in the letter, Paul will go on to describe himself to be like a nurse who cares for her children and also as a father for his children. This shows the level of caring that the evangelist had for his people, but, as parenthood changes people, so the experience of ministering to the Thessalonians changed Paul. For me, this is really challenging – not only are we called to share our faith, but we have to be open to being changed by those whom we have shared with. This is also what happened to the Thessalonians in turn – they became ministers to those around them. Although Paul never refers to the Thessalonians as apostles or preachers, they become both because of the impact of their conversion on other people.

Looking at this very early church raises some very fundamental questions. Do we see our commitment to Christ as something that will transform us? Is our faith infectious and can we be seen as role models whose faith can and is shared with those around us? It is clear that the church in Thessalonica had a great impact on the area around them – can we do likewise?

A Prayer of Confession

We confess before you, O God, that we are not always a good example of what it is to be a Christian.

We do not feel worthy that others should follow us. And yet, Lord, you encourage us to share your love and reveal your truth and lead others to you.

We confess that we fail, and we are sorry.

We confess our inadequacies and carelessness in standing up for what is right against what is wrong. Forgive us, Lord, and guide us in the ways of truth and justice.

We want to be a good example, a shining example of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. Amen