

Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup> 2020

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 / Matthew 22:15-22

Prayer: Lord we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things open our hearts and minds to hear your word to us and then may we with your Spirit's help live it out in our lives. Amen

When I first looked at our readings this morning and particularly the gospel I thought – here's a great opportunity to talk about how we, as Christians, should be conforming to the government rules and advice at this time. And while I believe that to be true and essential, my mind instead kept being drawn to the words of Paul's thankfulness for the Church at Thessalonica - we remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Surely it's these characteristics we need to develop as we go through these greater restrictions.

But first a couple of brief thoughts from the gospel before we turn to Paul's letter. Here's a picture of what is thought to be the coin that was brought to Jesus. It bears the image of Caesar and the inscription, which notably the Pharisees and Herodians didn't read, but I'm told is Caesar's name and the proclamation of him as Son of God and High Priest. For a Jew, and particularly a Pharisee, this was blasphemy – no wonder they didn't read it out! Furthermore it contravened



Jewish law for coins to bear the image of people as people are made in the image of God and no visual representations of God were allowed. So you can imagine how much the Pharisees hated and despised even touching the coin! It was also such a vivid reminder that they were enslaved by Rome as only those subjected to Rome and not Roman citizens were forced to pay it.

In contrast the Herodians, who came to Jesus with the Pharisees were Jews who actually supported the rule of Rome and normally weren't best friends with the Pharisees! Their testing question was even more compounded by the fact that some 20 or so years prior to this, a Jew named Judas had led a revolt against paying this compulsory tax. The outcome was horrific as he and all his followers were mercilessly crucified. Had Jesus answered wrongly it would have inevitably led to his crucifixion – but it wasn't yet God's timing!

Jesus went further than telling them to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. Far more importantly they needed to give back to God what belonged to God whose very image they bore and live as God's people. These Jews were failing miserably to do this – but when we turn to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we discover some people who were beginning to live in the image of God.

Here's some background – Thessalonica was the Roman capital of Macedonia. It was a key trading and communication centre standing on the Agnition Way which linked the Aegean Sea in the east to the Adriatic Sea in the west. Its people were proud Roman citizens.

Paul arrived in the city after fleeing from Philippi following an overnight stay in prison (which was very dramatic but that's another story which you'll find in Acts 16). Whenever Paul visited a new town - he spent time preaching in the synagogue. This time the response was really positive– it seemed like a mini-revival was taking place with some Jews and a large number of Greeks including several prominent women being converted. That was a huge step for these non-Jews as they turned from idol worship and a high estimation of Caesar as Emperor supreme - to serve the living and true God – in whose image they were made.

I'm sure Paul was encouraged and no doubt longed to teach them so much more about Jesus – but within just 3 weeks, some Jews who were very anti the teaching of Jesus arrived. They stirred up a mob, caused a riot, got some of the new Christians imprisoned and once again forced Paul and his co-workers to leave abruptly to save their lives and escape to the next town – Berea.

So Paul's big concern was – how could these new Christians in Thessalonica continue in their faith without anyone there to teach them? Would they give up and turn back to idols which after all was a much easier and more acceptable way of life?

Paul longed to be with them but couldn't! That's a feeling we all know at this time being we are separated from those we love and care about. Paul obviously worried about them as he cared for them deeply but turned his concerns into prayer. Was God able to keep them? Then soon as he could, Paul sent his co-worker Timothy back on a mission to find out how they were doing! Amazingly Timothy returns with good news – even great news! God had kept them and they had even grown in their faith. God is able to do far more than we expect and often when we least expect it! It's often the tough times that are our growing times. The other day I came across a Churchill quote which read – “don't waste a crisis”. Will this be our growing time? Paul acknowledges throughout these verses that it's not due to him – but God Spirit being at work in them – the same spirit that is with us.

As Paul overflows with thankfulness to God, he decides to write to them to encourage them even more and answer some of their questions that Timothy has come back with.

I don't know about you – but I'm still really excited when I hear the postman putting the letters through the door especially when I find something handwritten addressed to me! I rip it open immediately while the circulars and bills get put on one side.

May be that's something we could all do this week: send a letter to someone who is living alone or in a residential care home or just struggling with the current restrictions...

During the week, I was listening to an initiative within the Church of England encouraging people to commit themselves to praying daily - Lord, is there someone you are nudging me to contact today? I think it's a really good prayer... perhaps we should start with those we know well but then start thinking of those we've lost contact with or who are outside the church family? Our letter could make all the difference!

Paul begins his letter with thankfulness – always a great way to begin! News of these Christians was spreading along the trade routes throughout Macedonia and Achaia. Their faith was being talked about everywhere despite the severe suffering they were going through. So what were people noticing about them? Firstly

- their work produced by faith – their faith wasn't just head knowledge or even words. It wasn't a formula or a series of rules. While it was an essential personal commitment to following and imitating Jesus Christ they let it influence everything they did. Because they were firm in their knowledge of the living and true God and his working in them they were able to reach out confidently to others. We need to start with faith and a relationship with God.

Secondly

- their labour prompted by love. That famous chapter of love, 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that we can do some amazing and even sacrificial things – but if our motivation is wrong and we're doing it just to be noticed then our actions are worthless. Love instead transforms everything and takes the focus away from ourselves. Love gives everything..

love is sacrificial and Christ-like. God is love and if we seek to live in his image we need to love!

If faith points to God, love reaches to others. And finally their -

- endurance inspired by hope. Sometimes it's really hard to keep on going but that's when endurance is needed! Nearly everyone I spoke to during the past week was feeling down and said how that this second wave of the virus is already feeling so much harder than last time as we're facing winter, long dark nights and what is there to look forward to? Christmas is unlikely to be what it normally is. What keeps us going is hope! Hope of better days, hope of a vaccine.

And as Christians we have an even stronger hope - hope in a true and living God who won't let us down or won't let go of us and will even hold us through death itself as proved by the resurrection of Jesus. That hope can keep us going!

So can I encourage us all to live this week in the image of God – and not hide these characteristics? May our faith overflow with works which bring comfort and joy to others and glory to God; may our labour be prompted and filled with love and may our hope in the living God and his Son our Saviour Jesus Christ give us that endurance and enabling to keep on going! Amen.

Rev. E Blackmore