

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Sunday 24th November 2019 (evening)

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

What do you want to see happen in the future of this congregation? Or if you're from another church, what do you want to see happening there? What change do you want to see in the church?

How you answer that question reveals quite a lot about yourself: about your values, about what you understand of God and of the church. Most likely, the vast majority of us hope to see a positive change in the number of people attending for example. A really interesting follow-up question would be: why do you want to see the numbers going up? I wonder how you would answer that?

Because if we understand the church to be a human organisation and principally about caring for human beings and meeting human needs, then the church is really just the same as any other institution, charity or group within our local area. It may differ in style from others, in that it's more religious, but ultimately it would not differ in substance, it would simply be another form of social organization by which human beings seek to bring order and structure to their lives, and meet personal needs. Probably that is the most popular perspective on the church in our culture at this time, which maybe explains why people view the church primarily in terms of what it can do for them, and they then conclude that the answer is, "not very much", and so they don't come or they walk away from the church.

But 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 presents a very different view on the church. Paul begins:

“Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.” (1 Thess. 1:1)

This is the shortest opening section for any of Paul’s letters, whereas in many others his opening greeting can run to several verses and lines. Likely this is because 1st Thessalonians is Paul’s first pastoral letter, written potentially from Corinth, shortly after Paul and his colleagues have been driven from Thessalonica by persecution. They have just received a positive report from Timothy about the church there, after a gap of weeks, maybe even months, and so they pen this letter.

Paul and the others begin with these words, and they describe the church as something radically different from a human institution principally focused on human needs. Beginning here, but running throughout the letter, there is a resounding emphasis on God and Jesus Christ, and that might seem of little importance, but Paul is reminding us that the church, whether in Thessalonica or anywhere else, is “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church then, does not exist, and certainly has no life, apart from God and what He has accomplished through Jesus. This means that the church is not just another social organization.

Instead it is nothing less than the people of God, called together by God for His worship and glory, and commissioned to spread the good news...

about what He has achieved through Jesus. We might say, God does not exist for the sake of the church; rather, the church exists by God's intervention and for the praise and glory of God Himself.

Grasping this point fundamentally changes the way we think about church and the reason why we might want our attendance to increase. It's no longer about feeling good, or knowing that this place will continue, or wanting things to be like our past, or even to have some affirmation that we are somehow being "relevant" to today's culture.

Instead, if we grasp that the church exists in God and for God, then we can begin to understand what it means...

to be a church that truly is “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”, and this changes much of church life, of our expectations, or frustrations, even our priorities.

So, if like Paul, Silas and Timothy, if we too can grasp this about the church and break free of a view of church that is about me, mine and us – then what else might 1st Thessalonians teach us, and especially within our series on the prayers of Paul, what might it teach us to pray?

Well, this section is primarily thanksgiving, and it’s not the only portion of thanksgiving in the letter. We would need to read on to chapter 3 before we get any indication of what Paul is actually praying for this congregation in Thessalonica.

However, what we do read in chapter 1 is highly encouraging and affirming of the church there, and as the passage says, **these Christians** “became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thess. 1:7).

As a result, it’s reasonable to conclude that what is highlighted here are healthy characteristics which Paul would want to see in any congregation. So, this opening chapter might give us some ideas of what to be praying for our own lives, for the life of our congregation, and indeed for the wider church and Braes area.

I want to bring such thoughts **under 3 headings:**

- **Get vocal – with deep conviction**
- **Get out – into relationships**
- **Get living – in God**

So, let's turn to the first. **Paul highlights in this passage** that: "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere." (1 Thess. 1:8)

Here we see that part of the healthiness of the Thessalonian church is that they are vocal about their faith – they are sharing the Lord's message, which is the good news about Jesus.

The Thessalonians were doing this for two reasons – clearly their own lives **had been changed, for we read:** "you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath." (1 Thess. 1:9b-10)

In a time and culture where following one's family tradition and the local gods was so very important, to the turn to a new God, and to worship that God alone as the only living and true God, well, that would bring a lot of contention both at home and with neighbours, as indeed Paul and the church experienced. But so convinced were the Thessalonians of the good news, that they put their faith, and kept their faith, in Jesus – for the good news about Him powerfully re-orientated their lives, and that is one reason why they spoke about it.

The other reason is that they were imitating Paul and his team, who themselves were imitating Jesus and following the Great Commission of Jesus, for as we read tonight, Paul reminds the Thessalonians:

“our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord... ”

(1 Thess. 1:5-6a)

If we were to read Acts 17, which recounts Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica, then we would see that Paul reasoned, explained and proved the good news about Jesus Christ – basically, he got vocal about Jesus: about who Jesus was, what Jesus had achieved and the difference Jesus could make in people’s lives. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of this in his letter – that he brought them a message with words, and as a result of Paul being vocal about Jesus Christ, the Thessalonians also got vocal about their faith.

I wonder if we believe that we must, in our day, be vocal about Jesus, and that this must be a priority for every Christian? Do you believe that? Because, here was a group of everyday Christians, with no apostles, no great leaders, and yet they have been so effusive about their faith that it is being reported in other countries, never mind other local cities!

In our day, the need for all of us to be involved in sharing our faith is quite clear, at least to my mind: most people have no idea about Jesus, no idea of His relevance to their lives, barely any concept of there being a God at all – so it can't be left to a select group of people. If we want to see change in our church then every one of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the most extroverted to the most introverted, must get vocal with deep conviction about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, I realise we might not know how or what to share, but that can be learnt, and doesn't need to come first.

What needs to come first is a heart and mind that are passionate and convinced that the faith we have in Jesus needs to be shared, must be shared, some way, some how. And the best way to birth and sustain this passion and conviction, is to be praying about it – praying for God to change us, and praying for others to come to faith.

So, that is one healthy characteristic of the Thessalonians – they were vocal about their faith, and they did so, like Paul, with deep conviction. Is that an area which we need to pray more about as individuals and as a congregation?

The second healthy characteristic I want to highlight is: 'get out - into relationships'. We've already seen in verse

5 that Paul said, “you know how we lived among you for your sake” and we saw that it likely included them learning from Paul and others about sharing their faith.

But so often Paul also reminds the churches of the way he lived among them, in the everyday ways of life, and where he can, he commends them for such living. **We see that in verse 3:** “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.” (1 Thess. 1:3)

This too is likely being communicated in the various reports Paul has received, but once again, it came about because they were imitating Paul. **Later in the letter Paul says:** “we loved you so much, we were delighted to share

with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship...You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God...”
(1 Thess. 2:8-12)

What is striking about Paul’s example is that he actually lived among the Thessalonians – and not just when they became Christians but before as well! So, even in his everyday living, Paul was using his life to communicate the good news or build bridges to share it, and in this the Thessalonians imitate him, for as they work, labour and endure...

out of their faith, love and hope, then they are further promoting the good news and ringing even more loudly.

Likewise, with us the good news of Jesus Christ is not simply to be communicated vocally, it must also be communicated visibly. In Paul's example, picked up by the Thessalonians, we are encouraged to build relationships, even friendships, with those who don't know Jesus and then love them the way Jesus commanded us – with a focus on them living among them “for their sake”. Loving them as we love ourselves. Seeking to serve and not be served.

It's so crucial to build relationships because it earns the right to share the good news and it backs up the verbal message...

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proved this some time ago. The LICC was set up by John Stott, and it has found that the greatest influence on a person coming to faith was the relationships they had with Christians, and that the sermon only contributed a very, very small influence to someone accepting the good news.

If we want to be a healthy congregation, and if we want our congregation to ring loudly and clearly, such that people consider the Christian faith for themselves, then individually and collectively, we must explore ways that allow us to get out into relationships with people outside of our Christian circles.

That might include an evaluation of the ministries we are part of, both personally and corporately,...

as well as the lifestyles that we lead. We may conclude that we do have regular contact with people outside of the church. But equally possible, we might come to the conclusion we rarely see people outside of the church, and as a result, we might begin to wonder how to change that.

And as we engage with that exploration, as we ask questions and wrestle with the issues, discerning what to stop or what to start, or how our lifestyle could change, then this too is something to be praying about, so that we might discern what is necessary for us and so become a healthier congregation.

The third and final healthy characteristic that I want to highlight is: ‘get living – in God’...As we saw in verse 1,

Paul reminded the congregation that they are in God, they are rooted in God and draw their life from God. Jesus talks about this as well, in John chapter 15, where He says that the church is part of the vine – the vine being Jesus – and that as a result it is crucial for us to abide in Him otherwise little health will be seen.

And so, the lesson is clear: if we want to be healthy, then we must get living, and increasingly live, in God. We do that for the first time when we come to faith in Jesus, but we must continue to do so on a daily basis. We must get living, and increasingly live, in God.

The passage details some elements which reveal what a life lived “in God” should look like. In verses 2 and 3, Paul mentions one key element:...

spending time in prayer “before God”. As we saw last month, **the writer to the Hebrews**, exhorted them to approach God’s throne, to come before God, so that they could find mercy and grace to help them in their time of need. If we want to a healthy congregation then we must individually and collectively live in God by calling out to Him for help.

But time with God is not just crucial for receiving God’s grace and peace; it will also impact us in other ways. Faith, love and hope, which Paul mentioned in verse 3, are each sustained and deepened by being close to God and in His presence.

When I was a youth worker, there was a girl in our Scripture Union group and one time she shared her story

during our lunchtime meeting, and it was so powerful. This 15-year-old girl, who had a life expectancy of 31 because of S.F. spoke with deep conviction about God and she radiated incredible peace, contentment and joy.

Do you think she could truly radiate such a powerful witness if she wasn't living in God? Her times with God had infused her faith with strength, saturated her in God's love, and nourished her hope? She testified that day to the crucial need, we all have, of being with God, or living in Him, and it was that which brought about her powerful witness and deep conviction.

Or let me give you another reason to spend time with God: most people are not interested in hearing about God, for they think religion is dull and irrelevant...

But if we can communicate our faith with a degree of conviction and passion then we might help them see that God is worth knowing. But how can we possibly speak in that way if we are not living in God ourselves?

Like the Thessalonians, like that young woman, we too must get living in God - by spending time with God in His very presence. But there is a second aspect to living in God that Paul reveals in this passage.

In verse 5, Paul says that the message of Jesus Christ also came to the Thessalonians with power and with the Holy Spirit. I've already highlighted that the good news came verbally with deep conviction, and also visually through relationships, but this third and final element is absolutely key.

We are warned in the Scriptures that the spread of God's Kingdom will not be achieved solely through wise or eloquent words, nor will it be achieved by might, but only by God's Spirit.

So, what I want to ask tonight is whether we expect much of God or not? Because the word translated "power" here, is the Greek word that is often translated in other parts of the New Testament as "miracle", or as referring to God's miraculous power, and especially God's power to raise Jesus from the dead.

I have a prayer partner and they will often pray for the preaching of God's Word, but specifically ask for that preaching to be followed after with signs and wonders. Would we ever pray such a thing?

We maybe don't because we maybe don't expect very much of God. At Alpha on Wednesday night I had an interesting experience...(tell story)

Friends, I wonder how small and tight our understanding of God is? How small is the box we have Him in? A healthy church, living in God, should have a box that is expanding; for a healthy church, which is growing in faith, should expect much of God, and as a result be more willing to step out and take risks.

So, I wonder if we might pray around these things as well in relation to living in God: for discernment of how to live in Him, of how we might spend time with God, for passion to seek Him and follow Him...

But maybe we could also pray for our message to come with power and with the Holy Spirit, for our faith to rise, and our box to expand.

Our passage in 1 Thessalonians has given us a few areas to pray for so that we too might be a healthy congregation. We must get vocal with deep conviction, get out into relationships, and get living in God.

May it be so. Amen.