

ALL SAINTS WESTON

SUNDAY 16 OCTOBER 2022

A COMMUNITY OF INFLUENCE

I THESSALONIANS 1: 5B – 10

Last Sunday we had three services. At the first two our new Rector addressed the church spoke for the first time on a Sunday and he got us off to a cracking start with our series working our way through the first book of Thessalonians. I wasn't here but I have read it and I thought it was terrific. I believe we are going to be very blessed through his ministry.

In the evening we had a visiting speaker. Her name was Trudi Makepeace. I think it would be fair to say that her style of speaking was not very Anglican. It would in the olden days be described negatively as 'enthusiastic'. In the time of the Wesleys, Anglicans were decidedly against enthusiasm. In fact there is apparently a bell somewhere in England inscribed "*Glory to the Church and damnation to enthusiasm*".

Trudi's testimony is a powerful one. This is her memoir: *Abused Addicted Free*. It is proof that the word of God and the Spirit of God still has the power to transform broken lives and communities.. The first 30 odd years of Trudi's story makes for grim, depressing reading: brought up by an aunt who never loved her; suffering abuse as a child; drug addiction for over twenty years; years of shoplifting, burglary, credit card fraud and prostitution to feed the drug habit; court appearances and prison; living in squalor going from squat to

squat; a victim of domestic violence; ; betraying those who tried to help her ;over 30 attempts at rehab and coming off drugs – some of them in Christian settings But each attempt ending in failure. Until that is she went back for a third time to a Christian rehab centre in South Wales. And that is when she finally began to turn from serving or being the prisoners of idols and demons and serving the Lord. Now she is a Christian minister sharing her story and her faith with many in and around Bristol and further afield. It is a stirring, powerful story. It is one which the Apostle Paul would have recognised and expected and her transformed life was definitely to be seen in this fledgling church at Thessalonica, which we turn to now.

In Tom Yacomeni's talk last week, he told us he had put on his dog collar and walked through Weston introducing himself to the shop owners and others. I don't think he asked them the question "*what do you think of All Saints Church*" But if he had, I wonder what answers he would have got?

- "*I don't know much about it really*"
- "*Never been there*"
- "*Lovely building. It's nice to think there is a church even though I only go very occasionally.*"
- "*Bunch of hypocrites*"
- "*A bit happy-clappy I hear*"

I wonder if any would have said something like this:

“A marvellous bunch of people – they do so much in and for Weston – we would be all the poorer without them. They’re a really good influence.”

On a national and international scale, I fear the mindset of many, if not most, in the secular western world is that the Church is at best an irrelevance or a relic from the past on life support. At worst the view is that the church is:

- riddled with child abuse and scandal which is then covered up to protect people and reputation
- far too wealthy
- too often to be seen propping up corrupt governments like those of Putin or Trump.

If it is still seen as a community of influence, for many that would be bad influence. That however, could not be said of this fledgling church situated in the north of Greece in the city of Thessaloniki. Nor ought it to be said of us.

Let’s just briefly find out a bit more of the story of this new church and why Paul wrote what has become its earliest surviving letter to the churches.

Good bible scholars amongst you will remember that on Paul’s second missionary journey (somewhere around 48,49 50 AD) he had planned ‘just’ to revisit all the places he had been to on his first journey which is to say what we now call Syria and Turkey. But then contrary to his plans, Paul was prompted by the Spirit to step foot in Europe for the very first time. You know sometimes God upends our plans even when they have

been prayed over and undertaken in a prayerful spirit. And we always have to be open to that over-turning.

His first real stopping point in Europe is Philippi, named after the father of Alexander the Great. This is the great amphitheatre. At Philippa. If you look carefully you might recognise that figure in the photograph. Whilst there Paul and Silas are ‘*treated outrageously*’ as Paul described it later in a letter. They were badly beaten and thrown into prison where after singing loud worship songs at midnight, an angel comes to them and leads them out of prison – after which they make a speedy to the west. This is all to be found in Acts chapter 16.

In Acts 17, we see them venturing further into Greece heading for the very large town of Thessalonica. They would have followed one of the most important highways of the day, equivalent to our motorways. It known as the Egnatian Way – good for moving Roman soldiers and trade. It ran all the way from the Black Sea and Istanbul to the Adriatic Sea opposite Brindisi on the Italian coast. Part of it can still be seen today. A town of about 200,000 people. A very important commercial and cultural place.

As usual Paul went first to the Jews and the synagogue and then when they had tired of him he went to the Greeks - most of whom were followers of the Greek and Roman gods. With the Greeks, he seems to have had more success. Verse 9 in our Thessalonian reading says: ‘*you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*’.

Maybe because of this success, some bad characters are bribed to start a riot and spread fake news about the message Paul

and Silas are proclaiming. Their lives are in danger so they are whisked away at night for their own protection.

From there they travel south through Greece, stopping first at Berea where they are well received until an angry posse from Thessalonika comes making more trouble. It looks as if they have Paul in their sights so Paul goes further south to Athens. But as soon as he gets to Athens he sends a message back to Timothy and Silas asking them to join him asap. But when Timothy does get to Athens, Paul is desperate to know how the brand-new group of Christians in Thessalonika is surviving – or not. So Timothy is sent back to find out what is happening. Good job he was a young man.

After spending a short time in Athens, Paul reaches Corinth. It's been a roller coaster of a few months and he is probably worn out. In fact he tells the Corinthians that when he first came to them he came in '*great weakness, fear and trembling*'. Perhaps he was worn out; perhaps he had contracted an illness; perhaps his confidence had been shaken. After sometime Timothy arrives in Corinth with his report about the new church and the new converts back in Thessalonika.

And it is a brilliant report. The baby church is flourishing – despite the hostility and ridicule they have faced. Not surprisingly Paul is thrilled to bits. His hopes - and not his fears - have come true. So right away he sits down or stands up to dictate a letter to those he calls '*his joy and crown*'. This is almost certainly the very first letter we have from Paul that has survived. It is probably written in haste and great joy and relief.

From the arrival in Philippi to the arrival in Corinth is probably less than a year. But what a year it has been! It will have proved to be one of the decisive turning points of the new age of Christianity and a major reason, humanly speaking why the Christian faith was not lost as yet another weird Jewish sect.

Would the faith take hold or would be it be like the seed that fell on stony ground? Would it be choked by the persecution and battering it faced in its very first weeks and months? The answer was no! Word and faith have taken root. The church is standing firm. In fact, it has become a model to all the believers in the region. It has become a community of influence. Its reputation is spreading far and wide.

Now that is all very interesting – well I hope you found that piecing together of those few months in the life of Paul very interesting. But that's not the point is it? More to the point, is: 'Could we say 'hands-on-heart' this could be said of All Saints?

You have become and are a model to all the believers in the region. You have become a community of influence. The Lord's message has rung out from you like a peal of bells'

What do you think? Honestly - I think it would be true in part but not as fully true as we would like it to be.

Let's see what it was about this brand new church which has got Paul so excited and thankful and how we measure up to it.

A model to all the believers he calls them. Here are five aspects of that model. Let's call them hallmarks. A hallmark is a series of stamps on gold or silver items telling you the year of

make, the quality of the silver or gold and the creator. What were the hall marks of this model? Here are the 5– I'll go through them really quickly and while I am doing so you can do a check as to whether or not they apply to us as a church.

1. Firstly, there was the evidence of their changed lives. They had *'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God'*. Basically they had broken with the surrounding values and beliefs of the culture they had been brought up in – which must have been costly in terms of family ties, friendships, status, position and probably their livelihood. Right now in this country many are worried about a squeeze on living standards. And I don't want to belittle that. But I don't suppose any of us, truth be known, have ever had to think, *"well if I turn to Christ now, my income is going to drop, I'm going to lose my job ... no more going on holiday for me... maybe I will have to downsize the house."* That would have been the reality for some of those Thessalonians as it has been and is for many of our brothers and sisters down through history.
2. Another sign of their changed lives is the way they are standing firm in the face of suffering. Paul writes: *'You suffered from your own people the same things the churches in suffered from the Jews'* In fact Paul referred to *'extreme suffering'*. They are willing to accept suffering for their new-found joy and hope in Christ.
3. Thirdly, they value the word of God: Paul writes *'you welcomed the message - you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God'*. Paul's message

to them was not just some kind of Thought for the Day. It was a precious resource to them.

4. Then again – my fourth mark is that they have love for one another and beyond their immediate circle – *'you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia.'* Paul does not say exactly how that love is expressed apart from one thing to which we will come to in our next hallmark but we can assume that love was a practical love. It wasn't just a nice smiling at one another and a holy kiss when they came to meeting on a Sunday. It would have stretched to making sure that the needy in their new church family were taken care off and almost certainly moving beyond that church family. It would have been shown in welcoming people whose backgrounds and whose status were very different. Jews & Greeks; slaves and slave owners; rich and poor; widows and wealthy men.
5. In fact the one thing that Paul does say specifically about how their love was displayed is to be found in another letter written maybe 5 or 6 years later to the Corinthians. In that letter he specifically and pointedly refers to the generosity of the Macedonian or Thessalonian Christians. Generosity: my fifth mark. Paul reminds the Church in Corinth of the example & model they have been set by the Thessalonians and he urges them to show a similar degree of the generosity. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their [that is the Thessalonians] overflowing joy and their extreme poverty

welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability

That is quite something to say. Joy and poverty welling up in generosity.

Someone who is no friend to Christianity once wrote: *The persistence of religious belief may be irritating but it is not alarming once you realise it is just talk*’.

Well it wasn’t just talk with the Thessalonians. It was talk plus deeds. It was words plus a changed life.

Now the context of that church two millennia ago is very different to All Saints today. Theirs was a brand-new, first-generation church; ours is an old church - perhaps forty generations old going back a thousand years. We have to live out our faith in a very different culture – one which has some of the trappings, the heritage and the memories of Christianity but little of the power and active life that is to be found in authentic Christianity. One that is inoculated against Christianity.

But if the message of our church is to sound forth like a peal of bells and if we are to be something of a model to other churches and more importantly to the community in which we are placed then some of those hallmarks mentioned above have to be found in us

How wonderful it would be if people could look at us and our church and say ‘*They bear the mark of their Creator- they have the stamp of Christ in their lives.*’ It was said of some of early

followers of Christ that *observers ‘took note that they had been with Jesus’.*

Oh to be known as a church which is somehow different in culture to the prevailing one in the world.

Someone once said: “*Unless there is within us, that which is above us, we shall soon yield to that which is around us.*”

Brothers and sisters let us not be those who are squeezed into the mould of today’s society. Let us be known for our love in action, our valuing the word of God, our willingness to stand firm not in a hostile way but in a gracious way. But perhaps above all in our generosity. We may not have to face the kind of hostility that the Thessalonians faced, so all the more reason we can be generous and distinctive. Indeed I think we are a generous church – one of the most generous in the diocese I would say, both in our regular giving to the fundamental running costs of the church and to the ROCK Project and beyond our own doors. Later we shall hear about the work of Rose Cottage in Twerton which we support as part of our mission giving. Yesterday I read such an encouraging report of transformation work Eagles Relief is undertaking in Malawi and which we as a church have done so much to support. On Thursday this week there was a celebration service for Genesis which was founded by Peter Heywood and which we have been a faithful giver to for many years. I expect there will be a few running for Genesis today. Whether we are quite as generous as the Thessalonians who gave ‘*as much as they were able to – and even beyond their ability*” I leave it to you to decide. But I think Timothy’s report card might give us a B or a B+ for our individual and church generosity. And indeed for

some of those other hall marks. But we can have no sense of complacency or resting on what laurels we have. So let me end with another challenge and three either/or's.

As we step forward into another chapter with another spiritual leader at a time when we face many challenges, different to those faced by the early church but in many ways no less challenging, may we aspire by God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit to be a community of influence not a community of inertia – a model to others not a mediocrity – a trumpet sounding forth not a triangle weakly tinkling.

Let's pray.