

The question, “have you an excuse for your absence?” opens up a world of fabrication and deceit. Back in 2007 Stephen Ireland a footballer wanted to miss an International match and gave the excuse for not being there that his grandma had died. She was surprised to see the news in the paper. Then he said it was his other grandmother who had died. She was also surprised to see that in the newspaper. Oh, no, he meant his divorced grandfather's partner had died. Umm, nope. It turned out he was spending time with his "lonely" girlfriend.

I suppose we may all at some point have made excuses for not being somewhere and perhaps they haven't always been true.

When Paul wrote to these Christians in Thessalonica part of the reason for him writing was to explain his absence.

As we read in Acts 17 his short visit there had been stormy with a riot occurring and Paul and Silas having to slip away at night. This is what Paul was referring to in 2:17 when he said “we were torn away from you.”

Now, in their absence it was being put about that Paul wasn't a real apostle, that he ran away when the going got tough and that he didn't really care for this small group of Christians. If he did he would be there.

Paul wrote to explain his absence but we don't see anything about his granny dying or a private family matter or a long illness, or the dog eating his book in the reasons he gave for not being there.

In 2:18-20 he expressed his desire to be with them, v18 “we wanted to come to you” because to Paul they were v20 his “glory and joy”, that is he rejoiced over them and their faith now and they would be his glory, his point of satisfaction and pride in the right sense on that day when Christ will return.

Far from not caring about them he was inextricably linked to them.

What we see as we go on in to Chapter 3 is a Pastor who did care for these people.

1. Paul's care

Paul's care for these people is shown in the expression “when we/I could stand it no longer” in v1 & 5. Paul was concerned for them. Matthew Sleeman a couple of weeks back spoke of him as the nursing mother and instructing father well this is the caring parent who is lying awake in bed waiting to hear the back door open and know their child is home safe. Paul was away from them but it didn't mean he didn't care about them. They mattered to him and that is part of being a Pastor or minister that people matter. Do you ever have a moment when you think, “I wonder where so and so is now?”

As I write about a Pastor being someone for whom people matter I think of a Minister I knew named Maurice Storey. I wonder where he is now? He was curate in the church where I came to faith. But to him people really mattered. He gave me loads of time and friendship in those early days of my faith. He was a real Pastor as Paul describes here.

2. Paul's action

Paul didn't just speak about his care he did something about it and what Paul did showed that his care for these Christians was real. Four things:

a. he sent Timothy to them v1&2. It would have been nice there in Athens to have Timothy as his companion but his concern about how these Thessalonian Christians were getting on was so great that he sent Timothy to find out.

b. he rejoiced when Timothy came back with a good report v7 – it encouraged him and even more v8 it gave him a new lease of life. It was a burden removed from him and so v9 he had much to thank God for.

c. he wanted to return to be with them. The fact that he was away didn't mean he didn't care and certainly didn't mean he didn't want to be back in Thessalonica he did and it was part of his prayers as we see in v10 & 11.

d. he prayed for them v12&13. Surely if we care for anyone we will pray for them. A couple of weeks ago we had our mission Sunday and spoke about our Mission Partners and the opportunity to pray regularly for them. If we care even though they are far away we will pray. But of course it is harder to pray when we don't really know people. Paul did know many of these Christians to whom he wrote and his concern for them led him to pray. It is a continual challenge to us to pray for our friends and family, for those in physical need, those who don't yet know Christ, for anything.

Here is Paul explaining that even though he was away from Thessalonica he still cared for them and he showed the heart of a Pastor a Minister.

Let me ask a question, which of these people if any do you identify with, David Beckham, Dot Cotton, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa.

You may look at them and say well I don't identify with any of them. Their lives are very different to mine and have nothing to say to me. That's fine

When we look at Paul we may say the same. Here is the Apostle Paul and his life was very different to mine so to say focus on what Paul did doesn't really effect me – it's akin to saying David Beckham is working on his fitness levels while I struggle to walk let alone run.

This is a real issue for us as we look at passages like this because Paul is different to us. Bottom line is he was an apostle and we are not.

A few things to note:

i) this is the word of God not the word of Paul and as such it is there for all of us.

ii) as we have mentioned before we all are ministers, not least in the place where we work and therefore what we see in Paul in terms of people matter and showing our concern in our action should resonate with all of us. I'm sure it is easy at work to think I'm here to do a job and the issues and problems people have, whether it is to do with work or with their life outside, is not what I am about so I'll just get on with my job. However, I would suggest that we are called to care and to show that care in a positive action. I'm not suggesting you become the agony aunt of your company but that we see people as people. So as Paul did we can pray for them, rejoice when good things happen to them and especially if they move towards Jesus, and seek to share time with them.

iii) sometimes as we try to apply the Bible it helps to ask who do I identify with here and if we think perhaps not so strongly with Paul then who and the others here are the Christians at Thessalonica.

The letter was written to young Christians and it is as we look at Paul's concerns for them that we perhaps see more about how this speaks to us today because I'm sure we are not much different from the Christians he was writing to.

3. Paul's concerns

As we look at the passage we see what Paul wanted for these young Christians and through that we can see what God wants for us.

a. he wanted them to v8 stand firm in the Lord. Yes he knew that they had come to faith. However, he was concerned as we see in v5 that the tempter, the devil, might have led them astray and that his visit had been without result. They were young Christians and he was concerned that there had not been the time to help them build their spiritual lives on the rock and so that with the trials he mentions in v3 they might have been knocked over. This was why he could stand it no longer and this was why he sent Timothy. But he sent Timothy not just on a fact finding expedition. No, in case the building of their lives was crumbling he sent Timothy to shore them up. Timothy was sent as we see in v2&3 to encourage and to strengthen so that no one would be unsettled. This was his aim born out of his care for them that they should continue to stand firm in their faith despite the persecutions they experienced from outside the church and the bad mouthing of Paul they met within the church. I worked with a man named Richard Bewes for many years and the thing he constantly spoke of prayed and worked for in the churches we served in was that people would be established strengthened and settled.

Established in the faith and in the word of God, strengthened through the Holy Spirit and the support of other Christians against the battles we face in the world and settled or secure in that faith “no longer,” as Paul put it in Ephesians 4:14, “be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.”

So here is something we can identify with isn't it? Are you, am, I standing firm in our faith? Are we established with our roots down in Jesus and his word, are we being strengthened by the Holy Spirit and each other and are we settled secure and growing in our relationship with Jesus? Jesus spoke about being like a man who build his house on the rock, the solid rock of the word of God so that when the storms of life come the house is not washed away. For these Christians persecution was the storm washing over them. It may be something else for us – ill health, loss of job, loss of loved one, the battle of being the only Christian at work.

Paul doesn't send Tim to us but we do have the rock of the word of God and God sends his Holy Spirit and other Christians who, like Timothy can help to encourage and strengthen us so that we might stand firm.

Are we standing firm in our faith or are we being swamped by the things going on around us. If it is the latter then we do need to look for a Timothy to come alongside and help shore us up.

This really is the heart of the message today and it is the point we need to address.

As God speaks through this word who do I identify with? Am I Paul caring for other Christians especially through prayer. Am I Timothy whom God is urging to come alongside a Christian who is struggling or am I struggling and needing to ask for help to enable me stand firm. What is God saying to you and then how will you respond?

b. he wanted them to grow in love v12 – this was part of Paul's prayer for them in v12. As we saw in 1:3 he knew their love which led them to toil for each other but prays that will increase and overflow. Here again we see the point that we can't always easily identify with Paul because he prays their love will increase and overflow “just as ours does for you”. I would never say that and I doubt if you would either. But I will recognise that my love is often poor and weak and so needs to increase and overflow.

On this Remembrance Sunday as we think of the sacrifice of others in the light of John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends”, we recognise love and our own as small in comparison.

Then as we think of their sacrifice, as we prepare to come to communion, we see the greater sacrifice of Jesus because there we see the epitome of overflowing love. The cross of Christ is where the love of God is shown in all its depth, love undeserved flowing free. It would be good this morning as we receive bread and wine to simply ask God to increase in us love for our brothers and sisters in Christ and for all whom we encounter. Going back to your work situation and thinking about people there who is it that you perhaps struggle with, who gets up your nose or under your skin? Who is it that brings out the worst in you and who when you have been with them leaves you feeling bad about yourself because you have such negative feelings about them? Then ask God to increase your love towards them that you may overflow with genuine godly love to them.

c. he wanted them to live holy lives v13 – Paul's prayer was that God would strengthen them so that they would be holy and blameless on that day when Christ returns.

Paul had got the return of Jesus very much in his mind. It is there at the end of each chapter, (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16 and 5:23). That return surely is the greatest stimulus to living a holy life, so that when Christ returns we are found ready. I won't say any more about that because living holy lives is what the first part of Chap 4 is about and we will look at that next week.

As Paul writes we see in him the Pastor's heart caring for people, seeking to encourage them, rejoicing in them and praying for them. He does stand example to us but we also see through his care and concern a shaft of light into our own situation as God encourages us through his word to stand firm, to increase in love and to live holy lives.