

As we come to the end of 1 Thessalonians we in a sense come full circle. Paul began by writing about the church of God and he ends with the same.

This young church was important to him. He saw it in a sense as a flagship church, 1:7 "a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia".

Now as he concludes his encouragement to them is to continue as a model church living in God and honouring him in their life together.

To help them Paul touches on four aspects of their life, 1. Respect for leaders, 2. Caring for each other, 3. Worshipping God and 4. Praying for each other.

What I'm going to do this morning is share the preaching with Gordon Randall. He is going to look at the first and third parts and I'll deal with the second and fourth.

1. Respect for leaders v12&13

Perhaps you've heard about the leaflet passed around one theological college which suggested the brilliantly original scheme of 'Chain Vicars'. It read: "If you are unhappy with your vicar, simply have your churchwardens send a copy of this letter to six other churches who are also tired of their vicar. Then bundle up your vicar and send him to the church at the top of the list in the letter, Within a week you will receive 16,435 vicars and one of them should be all right. Have faith in this chain letter and do not break the chain. One church did and got their old vicar back."

I have to say that since I have been ordained every church I have been in have had a problem with their clergy....you work it out!

But there are serious things Paul is saying here.

The leaders are to be hardworking, they are seen as over the people, that is working as undershepherds to Jesus, servants as Jesus was but yet leaders amongst the people, and they are to admonish that is to hold up the true word of God to people as an older brother and so lead people in truth.

In response Paul calls upon the people to respect, that is give proper recognition to the leaders. More they are to be highly regarded that is as the leaders labour is motivated by love so the church's response to them should be motivated by love. And through this to live in peace with each other.

The whole is that each church needs leaders and how leaders and people work together is important. We cannot allow personality issues or those human failings that we all have to derail the work of God. Paul's plea to them was not just to respect their leaders but to live in peace for it is when there is peace and unity that the gospel goes forward.

2. Caring for each other 14&15

It is not just between leader and congregation that there needs to be peace but within the whole church.

They are to warn the idle; encourage the timid and help the weak.

The idle it would seem were the waiters. I don't mean here those who serve meals but a group of seemingly spiritually superior people who were preparing themselves for the return of Jesus. This meant resting in the Lord and preparing their own souls to be blameless. But in so doing they were sponging off others to keep them. The church were urged to warn such, presumably that their behaviour is not fitting in the Lord.

While we wait for the Lord to return we are to be active in his service.

Then there are the timid - the faint hearted who are easily blown off course by anxiety, doubts and any kind of trial. Those I have described before as having wobbly bottoms... it applies to many of us. See the gentleness with which Paul seeks to deal with such brothers and sisters. He urged the church to encourage them, that is to bring them fresh courage and confidence through personal support and gentle teaching.

Finally there were the weak, by which I understand he meant those who are easily tempted, those who can resist anything but temptation. Many of us again would identify with the weak. We know how easily we fall. Paul again is gentle he doesn't say despise the weak ignore the weak, throw out the weak but help them. They are to be supported and strengthened in the faith so that they are helped to be alert and self-controlled (5.6).

It is about the recognition that we as Christians are interdependent. We are not islands even though we might manage to sit separately from others we are interdependent. That is why our homegroups are so important because they provide the right environment for people to be open about their struggles in the Christian life and for this kind of help and encouragement to take place. And note in the following verses the characteristics of how we deal with each other in terms of patience, and kindness. In other words he called on them to show Christian love, love which always wants the best for others, which recognises we are all human being and so all liable to screw up and not just once. Patience with each other for so often change and growth in the Christian life is slow. I am not the most patient of people, which is a gross understatement. I could never understand why the children could not walk as fast as I did and why it used to take forever to walk them to nursery. For a start they walked slowly but then at one point Philip had to go up some steps onto a small platform and jump off. Anna had to stop and shout down a hole to her friend Ken who worked down this hole. And inevitably one or another would want to wander off in the wrong direction and have to be dragged back sometimes kicking and screaming so that we could make at least some progress towards Nursery. I sometimes think they invented child reins just for Philip!

Patience is walking with people at their speed not ours, not necessarily walking the way they want to go, for as we have seen Paul urged them to warn and to help as well as encourage.

But again just as the message to respect is clear so the message to be patient with each other is clear. Can we do that? Can we grow in patience with that person in our homegroup or who we serve with or even with our Minister?

3. Worshipping God vv16-22 & 26&27

Now you may say I don't see anything about worship here but all the verbs here are plural so they refer to the church meeting together from the positive greeting of each other with what is described in v26 as a holy kiss through to listening to the word of God as it comes in the letters of Paul v27 and through prophecy v20.

Just quickly four things he urges in their worship.

a. joy.

Joy is to be a hallmark of the Christian and so should be a hallmark of when we meet together. But Paul says be joyful always (cf1.6). They had

received the gospel with joy despite their suffering and he calls them to continue with joy. Our joy is a product of our relationship with our heavenly Father and that doesn't change even though our circumstances may change. Now I think there is a very important point here. It is to do with the way we view the problems and trials of life. I think for many of us when a problem comes along we can start feeling sorry for ourselves, that's true isn't it. We turn our gaze inward upon poor ole me rather than outwards to God and to trust that, irrespective of the situation, he is there with us. One writer put it like this "To rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening and to remain certain of God's future salvation." The point here is that irrespective of situation or personal feelings when they came together there should be a sense of joy. The joy is not manufactured nor is it false but it is focused upon the basic facts of who God is and what God has done in Jesus. Yes things may be tough for me. I may have had a shocker of a week but in God I can rejoice for he is my God and he has saved me in Jesus. Let there be joy shared among us.

b. pray

To pray continually doesn't mean that when they met that was all they did but that prayer was the constant. It was at the centre of everything. Prayer should be the preparation for their meeting and the heart of their meeting. One of the problems of having someone come up and lead prayers in our service is that we can disengage rather than engage. Prayer is something we should all be involved in and especially when we meet together be it Sunday or in homegroups or just with a friend.

c. give thanks

Giving thanks has to stem out of the prayer. Perhaps you know the rhyme, "Prayer and praises go in pairs. They have praises who have prayers." It is as we walk and talk with God that we see his hand at work in all the changing scenes of life and know that he is bringing everything together for the fulfilment of his perfect will. When we meet thanksgiving should be part of our worship. "Hear what the Lord has done for me" should echo through our times of meeting as the people of God.

d. listen to God

What was going on in Thessalonica is probably that with Paul having gone some wrong teaching about the return of Jesus had come in and the teachers were claiming a prophetic gift to support their teaching or the idle in their wrong behaviour. Because of this people were totally ignoring every prophecy. Paul gave them some clear instructions; don't put out the flame of God's spirit by rejecting every prophecy but rather test what comes to you so that you can hold to what is from God and reject what is evil. Now as we apply that we have to remember that this was in the early days of the church before the Scripture of the N.T. was formulated. So in one sense the prophets, whom Paul saw along with the apostles as being those who laid the foundations of the Christian church, have ceased to exist. But there are those to whom God does give a prophetic ministry, people who have a remarkable insight into Scripture its meaning or its application or into God's particular will for particular people or particular situations and we have to listen to what Paul says here. We have to be ready to hear from God through his word and its application and not quench the flame of God. But also, as we see from v27 he was encouraging them to listen to his word as an apostle and to have that word read in the congregation. So, whether we speak prophetically as we preach or as we share insights given to us, we need to say to the people of God listen for God speaking but test everything against the word of God and if it is true hold to the word of God.

4. Praying for each other v23-25 & 28

Prayer is part of our worship together but should also be part of our personal spirituality.

Paul models this in his prayer for these Christians. Paul prays that God would sanctify them, that is make them holy, which as we have been reminded a few times is God's will (4:3). And this in view of the return of Jesus. They have begun in the faith and through the death of Jesus have been made holy, acceptable to God, and Paul's prayer is that they maybe kept that way. But not only is there the prayer there is the assurance that v24.... The one who has called them is faithful and he will do it. He will keep them as his children to the end of their lives.

Given our human weakness and failing this is the only hope we can have for our salvation. God is able to do it because we can't. Here is the Christian confidence and hope that is such a huge part of this letter and I hope of our lives. Our Christian lives are lived by faith in God who calls us in Christ Jesus, who keeps us in this life and who will bring us safe to our eternal home.

Having prayed for them Paul asks for prayer for himself, Silas and Timothy. It is vital that we recognise the importance of prayer for each other. We do that in our homegroups, we do that through the prayer ministry at the end of the service, through the prayer emails that go out, through informal ways. However we do it let's encourage each other to pray for each other that God, who is faithful, will do his work in and through us. Please do take seriously the need to pray for each other, for the fellow Christians around us in the church here, our fellow Christians in Basingstoke, our Mission partners in Basingstoke and further afield.

Finally, v28 Paul prayed God's grace on them for it is in the grace of God they lived and by the grace of God that they would be a gospel church living in love and sharing that love with others. So for us may the grace of God be with us as we seek under God to be a gospel church, a fellowship of God's people respecting our leaders, caring for each other worshipping joyfully together and possibly above all praying for each other.