

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost [Ord 29]
22-10-2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Exodus 33:12-23 Moses wanting to know God's Glory

Psalms 99 The Lord is King – Bow to Him

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians faith

Matthew 22: 15-33 Religious leaders Question Jesus on:-
Taxes and the Resurrection

Introduction

Today, I would like to focus on our New Testament reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. The thirteenth book, of twenty seven books in the New Testament. In fact, over the next five weeks I would like us to explore this letter and how Paul has written it to instruct and enlighten the Thessalonians on the faith that he first introduced to them.

I would like to begin with some background information on both Paul and the Thessalonians, and then look at some aspects of chapter one which we have heard today.

Background on Paul

So, let's begin with some information on the Apostle Paul, who wrote so encouragingly to the Thessalonians, that his letter has been kept for us to learn from, 2000 years later.

Paul was a good Jewish man. Just like Jesus he grew up in the Jewish faith. Paul was a tentmaker by trade, but also very religious. Paul studied under Gamaliel, one of the finest Jewish Rabbis of the day and he became a Pharisee. When Paul heard about these new "Christians", he sincerely believed they were a threat to Judaism and so he sought passionately to eradicate them.

In chapters seven and eight of the "Acts of the Apostles", we hear that when Stephen was stoned and became the first Christian martyr, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul previously known as Saul, was there approving of what was taking place, and it says,

"witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."

And it also says,

"And Saul approved of their killing him."

Paul changed though. We know the story from chapter nine of the “Acts of the Apostles”. Paul had secured from the religious leaders in Jerusalem, letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that he could go there to arrest Christians to take them back for trial. On the way Paul had a supernatural experience of the risen Jesus and was blinded on the Road to Damascus. After this encounter Paul had a 180 degree turn around in his life. Paul went from being a persecutor of Christians, to being a proclaimer of the “Good News” of Jesus to all who would listen.

That is probably why the saying, “Having a Damascus Road experience”, is still in usage to this day.

Whilst we see the Apostle Peter as the leader of the first Christians, Paul was clearly the Apostle who took Christianity in a very serious way beyond its Jewish roots. Twelve or thirteen, of the twenty seven books of the New Testament, are traditionally attributed as written by the Apostle Paul. Although modern Biblical Scholars now attribute some of these letters to those who trained under Paul, or were followers of Jesus at a later date, most hold that the first letter to the Thessalonians was definitely written by Paul, and it is one of his first letters, that is actually retained in the New Testament.

Paul is known to have gone on Three Missionary Journey’s, before his final Martyrdom in Rome.

Background on the Thessalonians

Let us now take a look at the Church in Thessalonica. Paul established a group of believers in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. It is believed he visited there in about 50 AD. In chapter seventeen of the “Acts of the Apostles”, we hear how Paul, and his companions were only with the Thessalonians for three Sabbath days to share and explain the Gospel of Jesus to them, before some jealous Jews stirred up the locals and they had to flee persecution, similarly as they had done in other towns before.

Thessalonica was in Northern Greece, and was a prosperous trade city on the road between Rome and Asia. Although Paul sought out the Jews and the synagogue there, Thessalonica would have been a city filled with the religious pluralism of the day, with Greek and Roman deities worshipped throughout the city. It existed on the site of what is now the modern day Greek city of Thessaloniki, which has a population of about one million people and is the regional capital of Macedonia.

Even though the Thessalonian church was established very quickly, and despite persecution, they remained faithful to the teachings they had received from Paul. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is writing to not only to encourage and commend them for their faith, but also to clear up some misconceptions they may have had about the second coming of Jesus.

Thessalonians Chapter One

So let us now look at chapter one of Paul's first Letter to the Thessalonians.

Firstly, I would like to look at how Paul says that he prays for them constantly.

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

This is typical of the beginning of Paul's letters to the various churches that he writes to, and it invites us to think about how often we pray for other Christians we know. We regularly pray for those who are sick, and it is common for us to pray for members of our own families, but how often do we pray for other Christians known to us?

One way to help us pray for others is a Prayer Diary. Each Diocese in the Anglican Church usually has one. In the Diocese of Grafton, we have it in printed form, and it is on the website, under Bishop and Registry – Prayer Diary. It covers all the Dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia, it covers the Anglican Theological Colleges and Religious Orders around Australia, it covers Parishes, Schools and the many bodies and institutions of our own Diocese of Grafton. We are encouraged when we know that others are praying for us. So, I encourage you to continue to pray for other Christians.

If it is not a part of your regular prayer life, I encourage you to pray for other Christians you know on a regular basis.

Secondly, I would like to look at how the Thessalonians grasped their faith with joy.

⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people, we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit
(1 Thessalonians 1: 5-6)

Are we joyful in our faith? Sometimes there are things that get us down, we sometimes think back to when we believe things may have been better in our Christian communities, or when we were more accepted by society in general. But when we think about the Thessalonians, they had just started out and were being persecuted and yet they were still filled with joy, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We will always face challenges as followers of Jesus, but we should be filled with joy, because we know the way to God through Jesus, and we have the Holy Spirit within us. I know I sometimes struggle, but I want to encourage you that as Christians, we can know, feel and have joy, in our lives.

Thirdly, I want to look at how the Thessalonians, were an example to others.

⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1: 7-9)

The Thessalonians took their faith seriously. Paul must have received reports from other Christian communities in the area, about how they had continued to follow the teachings they received about Jesus.

It's encouraging when we hear good reports about others. It's a different situation, but I was so excited this week when we had a clergy meeting, and I discovered the Priest doing the Locum at Lismore was the Assistant Priest at the Cathedral in Townsville when I was a teenager. He shared some of the ministry he had been involved in and how he had known Bishop Murray twenty years ago in England, and how he knew Graham the current priest in Byron, from his time in the Bathurst Diocese.

Just as the Thessalonians, in living out their faith, provided an example for others, we too are called to live lives of faith, witnessing to Jesus, in the hope that others will also be encouraged as they seek to follow Jesus, in their lives.

Conclusion

Today we have begun an exploration of the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

We have looked at how Paul continued to pray for them after he and his companions first shared the Gospel with them, and we have heard how they had joy in their faith, and how they were a good examples to other Christian communities around them.

I pray that we too, will be encouraged by the words of Paul today, and that we will go out from worship today firmly trusting in Jesus, just as the Thessalonians did. Amen.