**3rd November 2019**

**Isaiah 1.10-18 2 Thessalonians 1.1-4,11-12**

Siya Kolisi led the South African Rugby team to victory in the 2019 World Cup against England in Yokohama, Japan yesterday. This year he became the first black man to captain the [Springboks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa_national_rugby_union_team) in an international test match and had a remarkable back story. His mother died when he was 15, leaving his late grandmother, to raise him.  Kolisi grew up in the impoverished [Zwide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibhayi) township outside [Port Elizabeth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port_Elizabeth) and endured a tough upbringing. He got a rugby scholarship at the age of 12 to a prestigious school and that was his break from poverty.

Kolisi like a number of the South African team, is a [Christian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity). Kolisi has spoken about his faith saying, *“While struggling with a lot of things personally — temptations, sins and lifestyle choices — I realized I wasn’t living according to what I was calling myself: a follower of Christ. I was getting by, but I hadn’t decided to fully commit myself to*[*Jesus Christ*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus)*and start living according to His way. Walking alongside a spiritual mentor, I’ve been able to discover the truth and saving power of Christ in a whole new way. This new life has given me a peace in my heart I’d never experienced before. I don’t have to understand everything in life, and there are so many things I don’t, but I know God is in control of it all. My job is to do the best I can and leave the rest in His hands.’*

He is a humble man and a godly man and a worthy winner of the world cup, even if it was at England’s expense.

This Sunday we start a three-part series looking at Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians. In chapter one we look at what it means to grow in faith and love and hope and be worthy of following Christ.

The second letter to the Thessalonians may be the earliest letter of all in the New Testament. Paul, Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy wrote this letter to believers in Thessalonica, apparently to address their concerns about the second coming of Jesus and also those who persecute their faith (chapter one) those who give false teaching (chapter two) and those who are idle and not contribute to the community (chapter three).

Boastfulness is not often thought of as a Christian virtue. If someone praises us, we tend to say something such as, ‘Oh, it wasn’t all that good’. If we hear someone saying how wonderful their church is, we think, ‘It must have its faults’. Yet Paul begins this letter by commending the Christians in Thessalonica for their growing faith and mutual love, and he tells them how he is using them as an example for other congregations. What he says goes beyond the usual niceties at the start of a letter: it is clear that faith and love are not just abstract concepts for these Christians but are being visibly lived out in practice.

Whenever you read a letter you need to ask yourself what prompted the letter in the first place. Is the letter writer writing in response to concerns or issues raised by the recipients? There is a lot of wisdom in this opening passage. It could be that the Thessalonians had written a letter full of self-doubt and self-distrust. They were afraid they weren’t good enough, that their faith was not going to stand the test, that they were not going to make the grade.

Pauls’ answer was not going to push them further into guilt and despair by negatively agreeing with them. Instead he would pick out their virtues and their achievements in such a way that these despondent frightened Christians would puff out their chests and broaden their shoulders and have confidence because Paul had confidence in them. Paul knew that often praise can do what indiscriminate criticism cannot do; he knew that the praise of those we love does not make us proud; it makes us humble; he knew that wise praise never makes a person rest upon their laurels but fills them with a desire to do still better and to deserve it.

There are three things which Paul picks out as being marks of a vital church.

First of all, they have a faith which was strong and growing. Growing in faith is not so much growing in your understanding of the Christian faith – though that is important, as much as growing in your confidence in Christ. It is a mark of a growing Christian that they grow surer and surer of Jesus Christ every day. Faith is not so much as what you believe, but as much as your practical trust. The faith that may begin tentatively and full of questioning and doubt - ends with certainty and confidence. James Agate said ‘my mind is not like a bed that has to be made and remade. There are some things of which I am absolutely sure’. Siya Kolisi said: ‘I don’t have to understand everything in life, and there are so many things I don’t, but I know God is in control of it all. My job is to do the best I can and leave the rest in His hands.’ The mature Christian comes to that stage when both in life and thought you can test everything and then hold fast to that which stands the test.

Secondly there is in the church a love that is increasing. A growing church is a church which grows greater and greater in service. You may begin in service out of duty because you feel that is what following Christ means. But hopefully you will end by doing it because in service you find your greatest joy. The selfish life is never the happy life. The life of service opens up the great discovery that unselfishness and happiness go hand in hand. There are so many opportunities to serve others in church life. From making the coffee on Sunday morning, to working with children and young people, to running a community outreach. How can you be of service? Those of us in leadership often tear our hair out wondering where our next volunteer may come from. WE often get tempted to fall into the worldly attitude that no one wants to serve but only be served and therefore we have to be apologetic or even manipulative – think guilt or fear to get people to volunteer. But actually, service is the way to a fulfilled and meaningful life. Paul commends the Thessalonians that their love is increasing.

Thirdly there is a perseverance that endures. The word Paul uses in Greek hupomone is translated endurance. It doesn’t mean the passive ability to bear anything that may descend on us. It describes the spirit that not only patiently endures circumstances in which it finds itself; but which masters them and uses them to strengthen your nerve and sinews. It accepts the blows of life but in accepting them it transforms them into steppingstones to new achievement. Do you know that power at work in you that can persevere and take the trials of life and have an enduring faith?

Today we have a retiring collection for Leprosy mission. Jegathees lives near Jaffna, a city in northern Sri Lanka. He grows and sells vegetables and drives a taxi to make a living. But life is not that easy for him; he a person affected by leprosy.

Although he is cured of the disease, it has had a permanent effect on his hands and feet. Worst of all, he still suffers from social stigma of leprosy and lives with discrimination from his community.

Many people diagnosed with leprosy experience negative social attitudes and stigma which can have devastating consequences on their lives, Jegathees said “I have a close family; they don’t discriminate against me; the big challenge is my neighbours. Despite being cured of leprosy and contributing to society, my neighbours don’t see me as an equal.”

When asked what would have happened without support from The Leprosy Mission, Jegathees said “I wouldn’t be here now. I tried to take my own life many times. But now my life has changed completely. I feel as if it has real meaning.”

Through support from The Leprosy Mission, Jegathees has been supplied with protective shoes and gloves, a water-pump, a motorbike and a goat. He was given nutritious food and help to set up a garden to grow vegetables which he sells to make a living. He is now self-sufficient, has grown his business and upgraded his motorbike to an auto-rickshaw.

He has also learned self-care techniques, so he knows how to take care of his hands and feet to prevent further injury and disability. Jegathees has been able to overcome many of the struggles he has faced as a result of leprosy, but for many other people affected by the disease, its effects on their mental wellbeing are a daily struggle. Which is why I encourage you to support Leprosy Mission today.

It wasn’t easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica. Acts 17 tells us how some members of the local Jewish community had opposed the church there from its beginning. Trouble had also arisen because Christians pledged their loyalty to Jesus rather than to the pagan deities who were believed to keep the city safe and could even be seen as betraying Caesar himself. As a result, the church suffered verbal and even physical harassment. Paul seems to think that this kind of ‘persecution’ and ‘affliction’ is not only normal for Christians but strengthens their faith. Do we agree? For us perhaps through comments on social media, or ostracism in the workplace – we might feel pressurized today? Mervyn Thomas came and spoke to us a few weeks ago about his work with Christian Solidarity Worldwide and was very honest that we know nothing of persecution of our faith in the West. He shared many stories, not just of Christians, who had been persecuted for their beliefs.

Leah Sharibu was one of 110 girls abducted from their school in Dapchi, Nigeria by the Boko Haram offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in February 2018. The next month, following negotiations by the government, the surviving girls were put into vehicles to go home. However, Leah wasn’t among them. She wasn’t released because she refused to convert in exchange for her freedom. CSW still campaigns for her release and we are still encouraged to pray for her and her courage in taking a stand for Christ.

The middle section of this chapter (vv.5-10) is hard for us to stomach and is deemed optional by the lectionary. It contains a dramatic picture of Christ’s return that contrasts sharply with the more familiar images of the Bethlehem baby, the preacher and healer, even the Saviour on the Cross. Allied to this are words such as ‘vengeance’, ‘punishment’ and ‘destruction’ that seem uncomfortable against our idea of a Jesus as Lord of love. Yet Paul clearly believed in what he wrote and thought that it would encourage the Thessalonian Christians in difficult times.

A few things I would say;

1. We naturally demand justice. Most of us, even in our morally indifferent era, have a deep inner desire to see wrongs righted and the world made good. Face to face with raw naked veil or relativism, non judgmentalism and even atheism count for nothing. Absolute evil calls for absolute judgement. Instinctively and intuitively we cry out for evil to be condemned and judged. People who have lived in societies where evil and injustice live unchecked will tell you it is a nightmare.
2. We fear justice and seek to avoid it. We want justice but usually for others. There is a widespread refusal to accept responsibility for our own actions, our own sin. In our victim mentality culture, we ae only to eager to demand justice provided it is other people who are being blamed and castigated. The day of the lord is a threat to those who have refused to love the truth, who don’t know the God in whom is all goodness, justice, mercy and who cling to wickedness, injustice, violence and lies. They are not obeying the gospel of Christ.
3. Christians should handle texts like this about judgement with sensitivity and care. Before we rush to judgment and consign most of our fellow human beings to the flames of eternal torment, we might pause to consider Paul’ aim and methods in speaking in this way. First, Paul is deliberately using the lurid language of apocalyptic which paints everything in bold and primary colours. It sharply delineates good from evil and in this way forces us to face ultimate issues. But apocalyptic deals in pictorial imagery and the metaphor of poetry. Given in special times and needs and to those whose social and cultural worlds are collapsing. Paul is also here speaking to believers. he speaks passionately and vividly to persecuted Christians to remind them of the rightness of their cause and their ultimate vindication by God the Judge of all. Paul is not directly addressing the fate of the unbelieving in general. He is guaranteeing to the afflicted Christians in Thessalonica that those who are afflicting them will be brought to justice. Their violence and evil will not have the last word.
4. The justice of God is always and finally good news. Does all this qualifying statement mean that we have gone soft on judgment. There are those who mourn the passing of fire and brimstone preaching. ‘where is the hell we have known and loved?’ with its Old Testament roots, the justice of god encompasses more than punishment and goes well beyond retribution. In scripture God’s justice is the righting of wrongs, the rectifying of injustices, the vindication of the victimized, the making whole and making good of God’s spoiled creation. Love wins. Our hearts ache for this. For reconciliation. For unity. For peace. If this, to any degree, is what the day of the Lord entails, then it offers a glorious hope. Holding fast to the legacy of the prophets and apostles we can celebrate the good news of God’s justice and purposes. We know by revelation that there is no alternative to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet we know from experience that through this gospel God loves his enemies and justifies the ungodly. It is enough to know that God is just and in this God we trust. Who else would you trust?

Pauls uplifting message ends with the most uplifting vision of all. it ends with what we might call the reciprocal glory. When Christ comes, He will be glorified in his saints and admired in those who believed. Here we have the breath-taking truth that our glory is Christ and that Christ’s glory is ourselves. The glory of Christ is in those who through Him have learnt to endure and to suffer and to conquer, to shine like lights in a dark place, to become radiant with goodness and loveliness. A teacher’s glory lies in the scholars and pupils they produce; a parent’; s glory lies in the children you bear forth not just for living but for life; a master’s glory lies in their disciples and to us there is a tremendous privilege and responsibility that Christ’s glory can lie in us. We can be such that we can bring discredit, or we can bring glory to the Lord whose we are and whom we seek to serve. Can there be any privilege, and can there be any responsibility greater than that?

May God make us worthy of his calling.

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