18th October 2020

**Call to worship**

Sing to the Lord, and praise him,
proclaim his glory to all the world,
for the Lord is great and highly to be praised.
Sing to the Lord, sing a new song to the Lord.

HYMN: Glorious Things of Thee are spoken



**A prayer of approach**

Holy Spirit, be among us as we meet to worship,
as we sing and as we read,
as we listen and as we speak,
as we hear and come to know,
as we learn and begin to understand.
Holy Spirit, be among us.
**Amen**.



**A prayer of confession**

We confess before you, O God, that we are not always a good example of what it is to be a Christian. We do not feel worthy that others should follow us. And yet, Lord, you encourage us to share your love and reveal your truth and lead others to you. We confess that we fail, and we are sorry. We confess our inadequacies and carelessness in standing up for what is right against what is wrong. Forgive us, Lord, and guide us in the ways of truth and justice. We want to be a good example, a shining example of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. **Amen.**



**A prayer of praise**

We praise you, Lord, for witnesses through the ages who have told your story and made you real to the next generation. We thank you for people whose names are well known and prominent, and we thank you for those whose names are long lost in the annals of history – but who are known to you. We praise you for all whose good Christian lives have impacted on who we are, and what we are, and where we are. We praise you that in every generation there are witnesses who stand out, who stand up to be counted, who make a difference to the Christian path. We praise you, Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that we have been brought by word, by deed, by action to follow you. **Amen.**



Lord’s Prayer

Margaret Underdown Testimony

**HYMN: What a friend we have in Jesus**

**1 Thessalonians 1.1-10**

Over these last couple of weeks, we have been celebrating receiving five new members into this church. And it has been great to hear some of their stories and their faith. It can make us feel as though we are doing something right: people want to join us!

No church is perfect, however. They say: ‘If you find the perfect church, don’t join it’. The moment you or I join the church it will become imperfect! Nevertheless, there is such a thing as a *model*church*–*a church that is a good example and an inspiration to others. People will travel from all over the world to learn from this kind of church.

The church in Thessalonica was a model church (1:7):*And so, you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*

Why was this? It was a church full of faith, love and, especially, hope:

*They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,****10****and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

The church was loved by God (v.4). It was a suffering church (v.6),

*You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit*

They boldly proclaimed the words of God. *The Lord’s message rang out from them, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but everywhere (v*.8).

This should be our aim and our prayer – to be a church worthy of imitation, where the gospel rings out not only in our own local area, but everywhere. The aim is not empire building, but gospel spreading. Paul does not commend the Thessalonians for the size of their church (we do not know how big it was). Instead, he commends them, ‘you’re the message!’ (v.8,).

Many scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians was the first book in the New Testament to be written. Some, like Tom Wright, believe that Galatians was the first letter, and this was the second. Technical argument – whatever, we are dealing with one of the first Christian documents ever written!

‘Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy’ worked together, travelling from Lystra in central Turkey to Thessalonica and Berea, in northern Greece (Acts 16.1–17.14). Their letter is to the church (*ekklēsia*, at this stage probably meaning simply ‘assembly’, as in Acts 19.32,39-41). ‘Of the Thessalonians’, rather than ‘in Thessalonica’, is unusual.

A current coin had Julius Caesar’s head and ‘God’ on one side and Augustus’ head and ‘of the Thessalonians’ on the other. But our Thessalonians owe their identity not to Rome but to ‘God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. Already in this earliest Christian writing, a mere 20 years after the crucifixion, naming Jesus as Lord and God as Father belong intimately together and carry political and spiritual ramifications about loyalty and courage in standing apart from everyone else in your community.

Acts (17) says the apostles preached in the synagogue, persuading Jews and their Greek adherents, but the letter suggests the community they established was entirely Gentile, since they ‘turned to God from idols’. Jewish Scripture is not quoted, nor are issues of concern to Jewish Christians (e.g. the Law, circumcision) discussed.

The apostles rejoice that the Holy Spirit that empowered them, now works in the Thessalonians’ faith and love, sustained by their hope of Jesus’ return. Imitating the apostles and the Lord – whose faith, hope and love were not conquered by death – they become examples for others. At this stage, the faithful were themselves the only gospel that could be read.

This means that the recipients of the letter would have no written account of the stories or teachings of Jesus (i.e. no Gospels). Indeed, such writing may not have been of much use to them, as it is likely that many (if not most) would have been unable to read. In receiving ‘the word’ (1 Thessalonians 1.6), they clearly accepted something precious, but they received it because it had been shared with them. Such was their enthusiasm for this word that they imitated Paul by sharing it and allowing others to receive it.

Are we more focused on reading the word, or sharing it?

The American poet and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: ‘Your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.’ This statement can be read either positively or negatively; but whichever way it is taken it is a reminder of the importance of authenticity. Paul backed up his words by his actions, and his behaviour gave credibility to what he said. Paul was prepared to endure hardship, pain and deprivation for his faith. He suffered much. He does not spell out how the Thessalonians suffered, but he affirms their endurance.

At the end of his sermon ‘Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse Four’, John Wesley exhorts his listeners to be full of faith and love; to do good; to suffer evil. In this way he imitates Paul by his words and encourages his listeners to do likewise by their actions. For many Christians, suffering is what other people endure – and yet many Christians around the world still suffer for their faith.

Beatrice Stöckli, an evangelical missionary kidnapped four years ago, was killed by her captors this week.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Stöckli was abducted in 2012 after originally travelling to Mali with Germany-based missionary group, Neues Leben Ghan (New Life Ghana).

After working with Neues Leben Ghan for a period of time, Stöckli then went out on her own, teaching children to read and write using children's stories and the passages of the Koran that reference Jesus. Subsequently, a local Islamic preacher publicly denounced her as a Christian missionary.

She was then taken by a group of Islamic extremists into the desert, tortured and threatened with death if she did not deny Christ and embrace Islam. After being held for nine days, the Burkina Faso government managed to arrange her release through a process of mediation.

Despite the threats, Stöckli quickly returned to her teaching job.

Then, in January 2016, armed men arrived at her door and abducted her. She appeared in several hostage videos, where she asked the government to help secure her release in exchange for the freeing of AQMI jihadist fighters jailed in Mali.

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) said it was informed of Stöckli's death by the French authorities after aid worker Sophie Pétronin, who was being held alongside Stöckli, confirmed that her fellow captive had been killed.

Even millennial western Christians face challenges. Many gospel values are countercultural – e.g. commitment, faithfulness, constancy. Paul taught gospel values that were personified in Jesus. The challenge for today is to embody those values in the lives of Christians and the life of the Church.

Christians at Thessalonica were not untypical of Christians in the Early Church. Life cannot have been easy for them, but they received the promises of the gospel with joyful anticipation. And that strengthened them to face whatever life held for them. The challenges of twenty-first-century living may be different, but has 2,000 years of Christianity dulled the joy and expectation? These were essentials for the Early Church in enabling their imitation of Paul and indeed of Christ.

The message came ‘not simply with words but also in power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction’ (v.5):

Words[[2]](#endnote-2)
There is a time to speak. It is not enough simply to live out the Christian life. Tell people about Jesus and what he has done. Paul writes elsewhere in Romans: *And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? Roms 10.14*

Say the name. When people ask how you are coping at the moment: say the name – my faith in Christ is helping me to endure. Its stressful but I find that praying about things gives me the peace of God that I need. Say the name.

The Thessalonians probably thought Paul was mad to share a message that instead of worshipping the gods of their pagan culture they should worship the one true God. In that ancient culture people would turn to all sorts of gods. If you were going on a business trip, a quick visit to the appropriate shrine was in order. If your son or daughter was getting married, serious and costly worship of the relevant deity was expected. At every turn of the road the gods were there, unpredictable, possibly malevolent so that you could never do too much in the way of placating them to make sure they were on your side.

Into this world came Paul and his companions telling these pagans that there was one true God and that this God had a Son and had demonstrated this fact by raising him from the dead. And people in Thessalonica, knowing from the start the risk they would be taking, turned away from their idols to this living God. This is what ‘turned’ in verse 9 means – it is as close Paul comes to conversion, when someone changes direction.

They must have thought Paul was mad to share the message he did. But some had found as they heard this strange message a strange power gripped them – the power that Paul would say was the Holy Spirit. The message would convict them – grasp their hearts and minds.

It is an encouragement to us that whilst some will find our Christian message weird and hard to believe, others whom God chooses, will be gripped and convicted by it and turn away from the idols and gods of our secular age to the living God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Power
Words in themselves are not enough; you also need power. The power of God speaks through you; the Holy Spirit bringing deep conviction to the heart of the hearer. The Holy Spirit changing lives and lifestyles.

In Thessalonica at that time there would be many pagan festivals. The results would be visible on the streets. People would notice these Christians and their changed lives: You know that family three doors down? They haven’t been to a single festival all month! But the reason this ancient Jewish message, that there was only One God to worship, now had the power to change hearts and minds is because of what happened through Jesus: the power of the idols had been broken.

If we ask Paul the question historians always want to ask, taking the long view, as to why this unlikely message achieved remarkable success, his own answer would undoubtedly include this point. Through his death and resurrection Jesus had established a new world order, and he would return to complete the work one day – a theme that Paul will come back to later in the letter. Now that power, the power of the Spirit of Jesus, is at work in the world.

Lives
Paul goes on, ‘You know how we *lived* among you for your sake’ (v.5). Even powerful words will not have a lasting effect unless your life is consistent with the message. It is not life *or*lips, but life *and*lips.

The gospel had gripped them and they were able to live with faith, love and hope. Hope that endured. Hope that welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering, Paul says in verse 6.

This week on the news we heard the tragic story of how a young family were killed in a road accident outside Oxford. Zoe Powell, 29, from Chinnor in Oxfordshire, her two daughters Amelia, four, and Phoebe, eight, and her six-year-old son Simeon were killed when the family's car collided with a lorry on the A40 to the west of Oxford on Monday night.

Two other passengers in the car, her 30-year-old husband Josh and their 18-month-old daughter, were taken to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, where they both remain in a critical condition.

The BBC News report mentioned that they all belonged to a church, the Chinnor Community Church. They said the church had put a cross up outside and people were leaving flowers and messages by it. The camera then lingered over one bunch of flowers which had the simple message attached to it. ‘Safe in Jesus’.

It’s a desperately sad and tragic story. It made me reflect on what I would put on a bunch of flowers for a family going through such a tragedy. ‘Safe in Jesus’ may sound trite but it also profoundly true. Paul had given the Thessalonians a message of a God who loved them so much that his Son came to this world of suffering and died for us, but his resurrection gave us hope that suffering and death will not have the last word. Endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, thank you for the life-changing power of the gospel. Give us the strength, energy, and enthusiasm to keep on telling people the good news about Jesus. Help us to do work produced by faith, labour prompted by love and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, in our corner of the world it isn’t easy to really feel the pain of persecution for our faith, but we know that it happens. We pray for those who are persecuted and punished, violated and scarred because of their faith.

We pray for those who despite these things speak out and speak up, and witness to you, the living God. We pray for the families of these people that they may be given strength and support in their own faith and discipleship.

We pray for those who teach us of you, who unpack your truths, who explain what living a Christian life is and how to follow you. We pray for those who guide us in times of struggles with our faith, those who stand by us in times of denial and bewilderment.

We pray for those who are fearful,
worried about the future and lacking in reassurance.
Please draw near to them and provide comfort.
We pray for young people who are anxious about school and exams.
Give them courage and hope as they look to the future.**.**

We pray for those who are hungry and sick.
We pray their needs are met and for your healing.

We pray for our communities, our neighbours, our friends and our church family.
Draw us closer together in love and kindness and help us to see your hand in our lives.

We pray for those who are dying in the faith, and those who are struggling to find their faith before they die. For these and all your witnesses, Lord, we pray. **Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Our faith in Jesus is nothing if we keep it hidden,
if we leave it here in church when we go home.
God, help us to put into practice
what we learn when we are together.
Help us to take the message of Jesus
beyond these walls.
**Amen**.

Notices: Hymn: Through all the changing scenes of life

1. https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/swiss-missionary-killed-in-mali-after-four-years-held-hostage-government-confirms?utm\_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=11904832\_daily%20news%2017%20October&utm\_content=3&dm\_i=16DQ,735TS,KCOFX7,SMYOI,1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nicky Gumbel, The Bible in One Year, [↑](#endnote-ref-2)