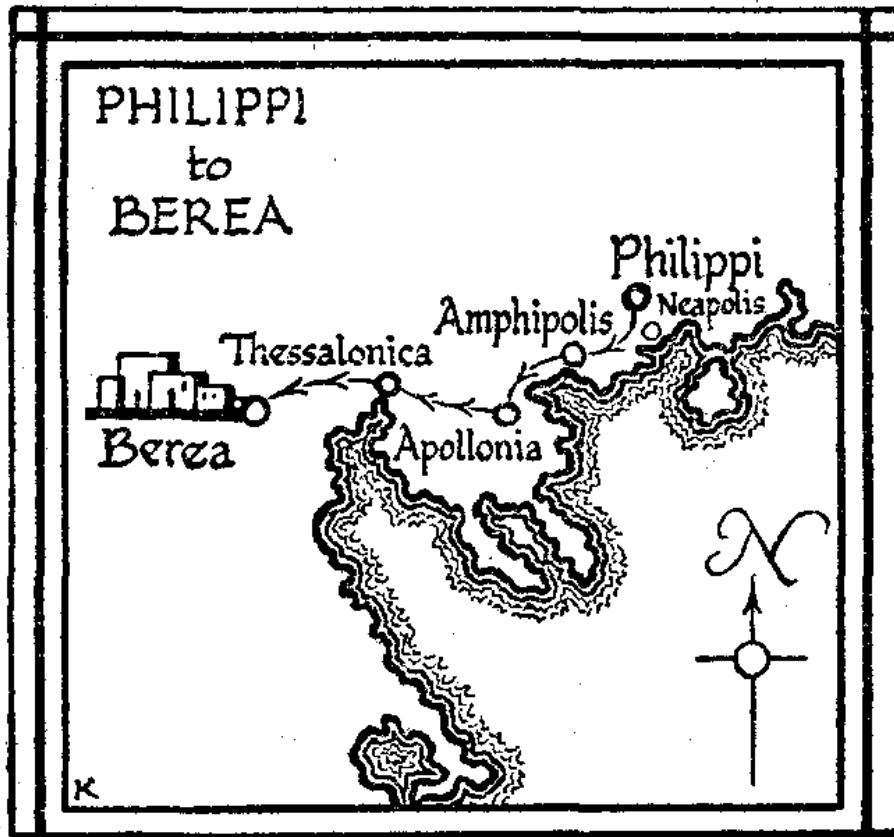


St Paul's Two Epistles to the Thessalonians.



Bible Notes
October - December 2013

50p

October 1st

I Thessalonians 1 v 1

Many scholars believe that I Thessalonians is the oldest document in the New Testament. They believe that St Paul's epistles were written before the Gospels, Acts or Revelation and that I Thessalonians is the first canonical letter he wrote. You can read the dramatic story of the founding of the Church in Thessalonica in Acts 17. St Paul preached the Gospel in the synagogue as his custom was. Some believed, including many gentiles and a number of wealthy women, but the unbelieving Jews got Paul into trouble with the authorities. They accused the Christians of turning the world upside down and claiming that Jesus is King. Gentiles who wanted to know more of God would attend the synagogue services. They felt excluded from the Jewish community by its strict Torah or Law, but they were also attracted to the vision of God which had been granted to the Jews. These gentiles rejoiced to hear from the likes of Paul that the God of the Old Testament is also their God and that gentiles too can become members of the people of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Jews of course were right that Christians acknowledge Jesus as King and thereby turn the world upside down, but they didn't at all comprehend what this means and why it is a good thing!

October 2nd

I Thessalonians 1 vv 1&2

Paul always begins his letters with a greeting which is at the same time a blessing – *grace and peace to you*. It reminds me of the beginning of the old service for the Visitation of the Sick, when the minister says, *Peace be to this house, and to all who dwell in it*. I use it in house blessing services. In turn this greeting derives from what Jesus told the seventy disciples He sent out to preach the Gospel, *And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house*. What an example for the beginning of any kind of social interaction – a conversation, a letter, a visit, an e mail, a 'phone call – to begin any communication with a prayer for the person you are meeting or writing to or ringing up. In some circles you might do it out loud. Some people would just think you were weird, but it wouldn't hurt to have a blessing in mind when starting a letter or e mail or ringing up or meeting someone.

October 3rd

I Thessalonians 1 vv 2&3

We give thanks to God always for you all.

We feel so much better when we are thankful! It is easy to complain about the way things are. It is certainly easy to find fault with other people, not least our nearest and dearest, and it is certainly easy to criticise members of our own and other churches. All this negativity, however, corrodes our own personalities. We flourish much more as people if we are positive, if we see the good in the world and especially the good in other people, if we thank God for the wonderful world He has made and for other people created in His own image. The Christian service is the Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. Whatever problems Paul has to deal with in the churches, he is always thankful to God for their members, his fellow Christians. It is a good exercise to thank God for one another.

October 4th

I Thessalonians 1 v4

Knowing, beloved brethren, your election of God.

The Christians at Thessalonica are the people who heard Paul preach Jesus and put their faith in Him. Some Jews, many gentiles, these are the people who kept the faith even when opposition broke out and Paul had to leave the city. What is the mark of the Church at Thessalonica is characteristic of every Church everywhere. We are brothers and sisters. We are chosen by God. We are loved by God. We love one another. This is what the Church is in Cuxton or Halling, Rochester or Harare, Kondo, Mpwapwa or Estonia (our link churches). We are called by God to be members of His family and therefore members one of another, one in love in every congregation and throughout the whole wide world.

October 5th

I Thessalonians 1 v5

October 5th was my father's birthday and one of his favourite services was Harvest Festival which often fell on this date. The Harvest hymns, the church decorated with fruit and vegetables from neighbouring farms and parishioners' gardens and allotments, it was a special occasion for the whole community. Harvest declares the wonder and beauty of God's work in Creation. Paul speaks here of that same power at work in us for our salvation – not mere words, but the Spirit of the Word.

October 6th (Harvest Festival)

I Thessalonians 1 v6

These Thessalonian Christians had been inspired by Jesus the Word of God proclaimed by Paul. They had followed Paul and therefore they had followed his Lord and their Lord and our Lord. They had shared Paul's affliction, but transcending any pain, they had been fulfilled by the joy of the Holy Ghost. I was asked yesterday how I accounted for the abrupt change in English peoples' attitude to religion in the last twenty or so years? Not so long ago, most people described themselves as C of E, if they didn't belong to some other religion. They had their children christened. They were married in church. They had Christian names, not forenames. When they died they had a Christian funeral. And in their lifetime they generally respected the Church even if they weren't tremendously committed to it or believed that its members failed to live up to what they professed. Even if people did not attend regularly, as recently as twenty years ago they would make a special point of coming for festivals such as Harvest. So what went wrong? There are lots of answers, some blaming the Church, some blaming the Government and society at large, some blaming individuals who do not seem to give God the priority which must be His if we believe that He exists at all. Whatever else may account for present day indifference or even hostility to religion, I think a loss of a sense of our dependence on God has played a big part. It is this dependence which we acknowledge at Harvest. Without Him we would have nothing, but He never fails us.

October 7th

I Thessalonians 1 vv 7&8

The Thessalonian Christians experienced this joy of the Holy Ghost. They put their trust in Jesus and continued faithful to Him even when the man who brought them the gospel was forced to leave town. No doubt the new converts faced ridicule, opposition and persecution. Yet other people in what we now call Greece and Paul says *in every place* heard about their faithfulness and joy and were inspired by their example. It is so easy for us Christians to get discouraged in modern Britain. But look at the people in Harare, Kondoa, Mpwapwa and Estonia and be inspired by their joy and faith despite years of persecution in Estonia, poverty in Tanzania, and poverty and persecution in Harare. We should be inspired by their example and fellowship and take courage so that we become examples too to others.

October 8th

I Thessalonians 1 v9

They turned from idols to serve the living and true God. What you worship is what you live for. What you worship is what you become. So if you live for avarice, sloth, lust, greed, pride, wrath, gluttony, these are what you will reap. An idol is a lie. An idol is vanity. A life spent worshipping idols is a life based on a lie and ultimately empty and meaningless. *The wages of sin is death.* A life of idolatry is a wasted life. The Thessalonians were filled with joy because they turned from idols to serve the living and true God. This is our message to our jaded compatriots who despise religion and imagine they will find fulfilment in material things.

October 9th

I Thessalonians 1 v10

Sub specie aeternitatis

Eternity isn't an afterthought. Spirituality isn't the icing on the cake of materialism. God is the ultimate reality. He is the origin and the end (in every sense) of the whole of creation – the material and the spiritual, the time bound and the eternal. Our life on earth can only be understood in the light of eternity. We can only truly live from the perspective of eternity. We live in the anticipation that Jesus will come and take us home and that only then shall we be truly fulfilled. We know that there is judgment for every wrong deed which is committed on earth and we know that Jesus can and will save us from the wrath to come. This is the Light in which we live. So, as they say, till your fields as if you would till them for ever, but live your life as though you would die tomorrow.

October 10th

I Thessalonians 2 vv 1&2

If you read Acts 16, you will see that before he came to Thessalonica Paul had been in trouble in Philippi. He and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned. Through their steadfastness and faithfulness the Philippian gaoler and his family had been converted and baptised and presumably this was when the Philippian Church was established. But it was a painful business for Paul and many people might have seen it as shameful, but, by the grace of God, Paul is able to turn all this to good account when he moves on to found a new Church in Thessalonica. Can we move on from bad experiences to achieve something good?

October 11th

I Thessalonians 2 vv 3-5

Not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts.

So how do we reach the world with the Gospel? What can we say that will move men and women to make a Christian commitment, to join the Church? A lot of what the Bible says and what the Church has always taught sounds odd in modern ears. People find it hard to believe in miracles. They can't see the point of prayer at least until they run out of "practical" solutions to their problems. They're not comfortable with the idea of the Last Judgment. If there is a heaven, they tend to think, surely everybody must go there. They regard the Church's moral teaching as out of date. They can't understand why we have a problem with women in ministry or gay relationships. I suppose the three extreme solutions amount to this:

- i) Stick to what we've always taught and tell people who can't except it that they are damned.
- ii) Accept the beliefs and values of the modern world and give up on Church.
- iii) Re-examine what the Church has always taught in the light both of the Bible and tradition and modern insights and try to discern what are our core values – the essential message with which we are entrusted and which we must proclaim no matter what.

I am sure you can guess that I hover between i & iii. They overlap with one another, but by how much? Remove i completely from iii and it becomes ii. But i without iii seems neither practical nor reasonable.

October 12th

I Thessalonians 2 v6

There are many temptations in ministry. Believe it or not, some people do look up to ministers of religion and it is tempting to bathe in their respect. There is a lot of value in enjoying the respect of powerful and wealthy people. They can be of considerable assistance in one's ministry. One can be so much more effective if powerfully backed and adequately funded. But not if that means neglecting the needs of the poorer and weaker members of the congregation or the parish at large or if it means tailoring the message to one which the powerful want to hear.

October 13th (Trinity 20)

I Thessalonians 2 vv 6-8

Paul is clear that ministers are entitled to be supported by their flocks. He himself, however, does not take a stipend. He doesn't want to be a burden on these new congregations. He supports himself with his secular occupation as a tentmaker. In the Church today there are ministers like me who are paid by the Church – ultimately out of the contributions of the faithful – and what are now called self-supporting ministers who receive no pay for their priestly ministry, but live on what they earn from an ordinary job. Obviously both have their place within the Church. If we came to rely exclusively on SSMs the rest of the congregation would have to take a much bigger share not only in sustaining the existing work of the Church but also in inspiring new ideas for growth. If we want full time ministers church members will have to find a way to pay them. I hope the choice will be on theological grounds, rather than grounds of expediency e.g. that a weak Church can't afford to pay its clergy or that a lazy laity would rather employ professional clergy than get involved in mission themselves.

What is striking is the way Paul nurtures his congregations, his willingness to give them himself – not merely his preaching or leadership or teaching or healing. The goods minister offers not only his ministry but himself the minister.

October 14th

I Thessalonians 2 vv 9&10

Paul commended Christ. He persuaded the Thessalonians to follow him in following Jesus by his holy, just and unblameable life among them. A good minister does inspire a community to grow in the Christian faith. A bad minister may indeed put people off. It is a tremendous responsibility being a minister and we need you moral support and prayers.

We all do have to understand, however. The only perfect minister was Jesus. The rest of us have not yet overcome. We still do fall into sin. You have to understand that our failures do not invalidate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the end, it is your relationship with Him that matters, not your relationship with the minister.

October 15th

I Thessalonians 2 v11

I think we protestants are rather uncomfortable with the word *Father* for a minister of religion. It reminds us of Rome! And some of us are still anxious to make a distinction between what we believe and what we consider to be the errors which crept into the Mediaeval Catholic Church. I hope we all now recognise Roman Catholics as fellow Christians, as brothers and sisters in the Lord, with whom we enjoy the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, for whom we pray, and with whom we expect to spend eternity. However, if we did not believe that, as the Articles of Religion have it, *the Church of Rome hath erred*, we would have no excuse for not joining it! We believe that the Church on earth is always prone to err and that includes the Church of England and any other denomination to which we might belong. We just have to measure our Church the way we measure our own lives, prayerfully against Scripture and seeking to remain in love and charity with those with whom we may have to disagree.

Jesus warns of the dangers of titles like, father, master and teacher, which may suggest that we are putting human beings in the place of God. We all have direct access to God our Father, Master & Teacher, through faith in Jesus Christ and we need no human intermediary. In Thessalonians, however, Paul is talking about loving like a father, not coming between God and His children, the Thessalonian Christians. In the sense of loving relationships under God, we may indeed be fathers, teachers and even masters to one another.

October 16th

I Thessalonians 2 v12

That you would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

Those of you who hear me preach often and read these notes regularly will know that walking worthy of God, worthy of our Christian vocation, is one of my favourite themes. I am not, therefore, going to say any more about it today than this – to ask you to work out for yourself what it means in your own life to walk worthy of God. It is your pilgrimage, not anybody else's, your journey through life.

October 17th

I Thessalonians 2 v13

Ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.

This takes some thinking about. The Bible which we read, the sermons we hear, the Christian teaching we receive, are they the word of men or the word of God? Of course it is a man (or maybe a woman) who is actually speaking or writing, but what is he or she uttering – the word of God or the word of men? If it is the word of men we are reading or hearing from the pulpit or desk, then we are entitled to question it – not merely entitled, but required to judge the word for ourselves and to decide whether we believe it or not. If it is the word of men, there is nothing special about the preaching of the Gospel or about the Bible itself. The Bible would be just a collection of ancient books – maybe good books, but the word of men for all that and comparable with other ancient wisdom, which we are free to accept or reject.

To regard the Bible as the word of men is fatal to Christian belief. Paul thanks God that his hearers in Thessalonica knew the difference between the word of God and the word of men. They recognised Paul's preaching authentically as the word of God. If it was just Paul's ideas, why should anyone put his or her faith in them? I wonder if the weakness of the modern Church can be attributed to our failure to treat the Bible as the Word of God? I think perhaps too we fail to treat the sermon with sufficient respect. Insofar as the preacher does his duty, he is proclaiming the Word of God, not sharing his own ideas about things, not even teaching a lesson, but proclaiming the Word of God. The hearers have a duty to judge the sermon prayerfully in the light of Scripture, but the point at issue is not whether they like what they hear or even agree with it, but whether it is authentically the Word of God.

October 18th (St Luke)

I Thessalonians 2 v14

Jesus told His disciples to begin preaching the Gospel in Jerusalem and Judaea. These therefore were the first Christians and they were persecuted from quite early on – not least by the unconverted Paul. They had a certain prestige in which the new-born Thessalonians now share because they too have been persecuted.

October 19th

I Thessalonians 2 vv 15&16

The Jews were the chosen people and Jesus the Messiah was a Jew. But they rejected and crucified Him and they are now maintaining that the gentiles cannot be incorporated into the people of God. Yet what becomes plain in Jesus and what was always there in God's dealings with His people in the Old Testament (though hidden because of unbelief) is that God is the God of every nation and that His promises are for all people.

The two questions we are asked here is whether we have become like those Jews of NT times and really believe that the Christian religion is mainly meant for people like us and, if we do believe that the Good News is for everyone, what are we doing to share our faith with people who are not like us?

October 20th (Trinity 21)

I Thessalonians 2 vv 17&18

Paul wanted to make face to face contact with the Thessalonian Christians – not merely to write to them, or to hear their news from mutual friends. I don't suppose he would have been content with e mail or electronic social media either or to speak to them on the telephone. All these communications media have their place, but fellowship is of the essence of Christianity. It is not sufficient to keep your distance from other Christians and to relate to God only as an individual. TV and radio services, Christian websites, etc. are all good and maybe the best you can do if you are housebound, but Christian friends should still visit personally and make actual human contact.

There might be something of what we read about yesterday when the Jews didn't really want fellowship with the gentiles within the people of God. Do we really want to share our Church with people who are not like us?

October 21st

I Thessalonians 2 vv 19&20

Yet for Paul his fellow Christians are his glory and joy. Such should be the relationship between minister and congregation and between members of the congregation, rich or poor, young or old.

October 22nd

I Thessalonians 3 v1

When Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica he went to another town called Berea. According to Acts 17¹¹ the Jews there *were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so*. These Berean Jews were any preacher's ideal audience. They were keen to receive the word of God. They listened attentively to the preacher and checked his message against the Bible to discover whether it really was the Word of God and not merely the word of men. They searched the Scriptures daily. The Word of God matters far more than pretty well anything else we are likely to be doing daily.

Paul's Thessalonian Jewish opponents heard about this and came and stirred up trouble in Berea. This is when Paul travelled to Athens and you can read in Acts 17 how differently he preached the same Gospel to an entirely different audience – pagan Athenian philosophers, rather than the Jews and gentile God-fearers at the synagogue where he usually preached. Same message, but the way it is proclaimed has to take account of the audience!

October 23rd

I Thessalonians 3 v2

While it was not safe for Paul to return to Thessalonica, he sent Timothy to support the Christians there. The Church is not merely the local congregation, self-sufficient, self-propagating. We are members one of another, part of a greater whole – the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We receive ministry and support from the wider Church just as we play our part in supporting other congregations and the Church at “higher” levels – diocesan, national and worldwide.

October 24th

I Thessalonians 3 vv 3&4

The early Church quickly came to expect persecution. It was a part of being a Christian. Indeed the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church. Faith was worth suffering and dying for because faith was everything. Martyrdom was nothing to fear because it meant going to be with Jesus. Such love on the part of Christians persuaded others to join the Christian Church. Is our problem that we have it too easy?

October 25th

I Thessalonians 3 vv 5&6

In the days before most people had telephones a family member in Sheerness was known to be at the point of death. The family in Frindsbury awaited news and it turned out that the clock in the house in Frindsbury stopped at the very time the lady in Sheerness breathed her last. Well so I was told. I have no way of knowing whether or not this is true. We do, however, seek news of our loved ones. It's much easier nowadays with 'phones and the internet. Paul had to rely on Timothy bringing a message. But, however we communicate, fellowship is the point. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, a communion of love. So we seek news of one another in our own congregation and in the wider Church. We pray for one another, support one another financially and support one another in other ways if we can. We can do this personally and through diocesan, national or international bodies. The danger perhaps in the modern world is that communication is so very easy that we can find ourselves in communication with hundreds of people but in fellowship with hardly anyone. Facebook friends anyone? Valuable as we may find these contacts, we shall be less than human if we don't make genuine relationships with real commitment the one to the other.

October 26th

I Thessalonians 3 v7

The message Timothy apparently brought to Paul was not that the Thessalonians were now safe from persecution. Paul was comforted not by their safety, but by the fact that in the face of persecution they remained faithful and full of love. So what really matters? We rightly pray that the persecuted will be let out of prison, set free, saved from death, left in peace, even that their tormenters will be converted. We rightly pray that the poor will receive the financial help they require, that the hungry will be fed, the naked clothed, the homeless housed. We rightly pray for the sick to be healed and we rightly want everybody to have the chance to be educated. These are all good things to work for and to pray for. But are they in fact the most important things? Doesn't it matter more to be faithful and loving than to be safe, free from want, healthy, comfortable and well-educated? Do we ever allow our proper concern for all those material goods to obscure our vision of the most important good of all?

For now we live if ye stand fast in the Lord.

Paul's life is bound up with the faithfulness of his converts to Christ. There is that bond between them. There is this bond between Christians that our life is bound up with the faithfulness of our fellow Christians. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Christ came so that we might have life in all its fulness. He is the Resurrection and the Life. His Body is the Church.

We still have to say that the church is not the building, but the people. I think we still sometimes have to correct people who call becoming an ordained minister *going into the Church*. We enter the Church when we are baptised. If we are true to our Baptism, at that point we become full time (and eternal) ministers of Christ – irrespective of whether we ever engage in any paid, authorised or ordained ministry.

Even if we avoid these errors, I doubt if we fully take on what it means to say that we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, what it means to be a member of a divine society, a fellowship of love with millions of members throughout this world and already in Heaven. Jesus tells us that Christians ought to love one another as He loves us. And how much does Jesus love us? This is the fellowship of the Church and it is the reason that Paul's life depends on his Thessalonian converts' faithfulness.

Today is Bible Sunday. One of the great achievements of the Protestant Reformation was to make the Bible available to all believers. Much of what I have written above depends heavily on my knowledge of the Scriptures. I have no other authority to preach or to teach. And the Scriptures are as available to you as they are to me. Read the Bible. In it you will find the words of life. In it you will find the resources to fulfil your vocation as a Christian disciple, as a member of the Body of Christ, as a part of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

October 28th (St Simon & St Jude)

I Thessalonians 3 vv 8&9

It is interesting that Paul talks about perfecting what is lacking in their faith. We might think that they were doing quite well if they, as new converts, had remained faithful and full of love in the face of persecution. I expect Paul is talking about doctrine they need to learn and perhaps something of the ethical standards by which Christians are called to live.

There is however always something lacking in our faith which needs perfecting. There always will be until we die and go to Heaven. It is only when we see Jesus face to face that we shall be made like Him. Until then, there will always be something lacking in our faith. Some Christians beat themselves up about this and may wonder if they are really Christians at all. There is no need. We are already the children of God, even if we don't yet know what we shall be (I John 3¹⁻³). The thing is that *every man* (or woman, you and I) *purifieth himself even as he is pure*. In other words, imperfect as we are, we seek God's grace to be worthy of our Christian calling. Some Christians, on the other hand, are complacent and don't think imperfection matters. Well just think of the love of Jesus and what you are missing.

October 29th

I Thessalonians 3 vv 11-13

Paul prays that he will be able to visit Thessalonica again. It is right to pray for what we think is good in our lives, always subject to the proviso, *thy will be done*. We pray for whatever we think would be good, but we trust God to know what is good and to answer our prayers accordingly.

In what looks like a more spiritual prayer (and note that Paul prays about everything, worldly and spiritual) Paul asks God to enable the Thessalonian Christians to complete their Christian pilgrimage, to become better Christians in this life and at last to meet Him face to face and to spend eternity with Him.

To become a Christian, to grow as a Christian is the gift of God. It is God Who makes us the people we are. He gives us the grace to have the faith which enables us to do the good works. (Ephesians 2⁸⁻¹⁰).

October 30th

I Thessalonians 4 v1

Before Christians were called Christians, they were called people of the Way. Jesus describes Himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Right back at the beginning of Genesis Enoch is said to walk with God. He lived his life on earth with God as his companion. He walked in accordance with God's holy Law. At last he walked into God's eternal Presence, without it seems even going through the formality of dying – Genesis 5²¹⁻²⁴. Throughout the Old Testament living the good life is described as walking with God. We are on a journey from birth to death, from Egypt to the Promised Land, from exile to the Holy City, from earth to Heaven. Christ is both the Way and the End of our journey, its purpose and its conclusion. People on a journey enjoy their experiences on the way, the people they meet, the landscapes they pass through, the challenges they face and the sheer joy of walking, cycling, driving or travelling on a train, plane or boat, but, if they become too tied up in the places they go through, if they put down roots, if they become too tied up with people who are not travelling with them, if they settle down in alien territory, then they will never get home. We thank God for all the wonderful things of this world. We thank God for our lives on earth, the people we meet, the opportunities we have, but, if we forget that this world is not our home, we may fail to reach our ultimate destination as citizens of Heaven.

October 31st

I Thessalonians 4 vv 2-5

I've often felt that the Church is much more censorious of sexual sin than other kinds of sin. Christians seem to be able to turn a blind eye to avarice, sloth, greed, pride, wrath, & gluttony (their own as well as other people's) while having no patience at all with those whose sins originate in lust. I have sometimes unkindly wondered whether some of us are so unforgiving of sexual sin because we haven't had the opportunity ourselves, whereas we can all be greedy, slothful, avaricious, proud, wrathful or gluttonous and therefore understand why other people should be any or all of those things. However we do now see the consequences of unbridled lust on our streets *to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites like brute beasts that have no understanding* in failed relationships, domestic violence and fatherless children. We should heed Paul's warning to the Thessalonians! This is what people do *who know not God*.

November 1st (All Saints)

I Thessalonians 4 v6

I got stuck on this verse. Quite frankly I don't know what Paul means. Some commentators think that he is changing the subject from sexual sin to other kinds of sin – overreaching ambition, fraud or some such. Much more likely Paul is still talking about sexual sin, but is too delicate to be specific. It reminds me of when I was teaching a Sunday School class the Ten Commandments and they asked me what adultery was. I told them when they were old enough to know what adultery was they would know not to commit it. Anyway, whatever sin Paul means here, Christians are to avoid it – sexual sin, a sin against ethical business practices, a sin against a neighbour.

November 2nd (All Souls)

I Thessalonians 4 v7

For God hath called us not unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.

When we started inviting people to Communion with the words *God's holy gifts for God's holy people*, some people thought that it was presumptuous of us to claim to be holy people. The clue is in the response, *Jesus Christ is holy, Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. God is holy and to be holy is to be set apart for God. God is righteous and to be set apart for God requires righteousness. Jesus fulfils all the Law's demands. He alone is holy. He alone is righteous. He is holy because He is God. He is holy because He is the Servant of God, set apart to fulfil God's work in Creation by redeeming and sanctifying it (making everything holy). When we are baptised in faith, our sins are washed away. We are justified. We are sanctified. We are set apart to serve God in the world. We are members of Christ's Body. We are members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We are therefore holy because of what Christ has done for us in yielding His Life as a sacrifice on the Cross for the sins of the whole world.

As Christians we are set apart for the work that God gave Jesus to do. *Just as the Father sent me, even so send I you*. Being holy because Jesus is holy, we are required to live holy lives, to seek, by the grace of God, to live lives free from sin. If you like, as Christians we are called to become what we are, a royal priesthood, sanctifying the world by our preaching and teaching, by our love in action, by our influence on other people and the organs of state, and by our prayers.

November 3rd (4th Sunday Before Advent)

I Thessalonians 4 v8

How many commandments are there? The obvious answer is the Ten Commandments which head the Law which God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. The Jews calculate 613 commandments. Alternatively we might reduce the list to two commandments – the love of God and neighbour. But don't they in fact come down to one commandment? *He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?* (I John 4²⁰). If we don't treat other people with love, we disobey God, we dishonour the One Who said, *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me*, we quench the Holy Spirit Whom He has given to us.

November 4th

I Thessalonians 4 v9

Θεοδιδακτοι. That word won't mean anything to anyone who doesn't know New Testament Greek, but it is a beautiful word. I strongly suspect that St Paul made it up. It means taught by God. Ultimately we don't need Paul or anyone else to teach us to love one another. God Himself teaches us. He gives us conscience and reason. He gives us the Bible and the teaching of the Church. Above all that, He gives us the Holy Spirit.

November 5th

I Thessalonians 4 v10

The Church at Thessalonica, like all churches, is a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Just as the three persons of the Trinity are one in love and God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one with the believer in love, so believers are one with one another in love. A church is a fellowship of love in the Holy Spirit, a microcosm of the communion of saints. Every local church is, however, part of a much bigger whole. We are all part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church throughout the world. It follows that our Christian love encompasses not only our local congregation, our parish, but also the deanery, diocese and province, the Church of England and the Anglican Communion – as well as that far greater number of Christians throughout the world of other denominations of God's Church. Charity begins at home. Love starts with those closest but it flows out into the world. True love always reaches out to encompass more. Our love is like our muscles. The more it is exercised, the more it grows.

November 6th

I Thessalonians 4 vv 11&12

Being a Christian is exciting. Especially when it is all new. Imagine overcoming persecution. Reading the Bible for the first time. Experiencing prayer. Sharing in fellowship with other people who are just experiencing the same things as you are and all for the first time. Imagine the Breaking of Bread, maybe in someone's house, half afraid that the Church's enemies will mount a raid, very conscious that Christ is present as you proclaim His Death until He comes again. Add in the expectation that soon Jesus will return and the Kingdom of Heaven will come. And what have you? Joy, excitement, enthusiasm. But also the possibility that you'll stop bothering with daily necessities such as earning a living, that you'll become a pain in the neck to people who don't share your enthusiasm, that you will become irresponsible and a possible burden on others.

November 7th

I Thessalonians 4 vv 13-18

Because many early Christians believed that Jesus would very soon return and establish His Kingdom, they expected to live to see that day. So they became concerned when people died before Jesus came back. Would they miss out? We're probably the other way round. We seldom think of the end of the world and Jesus returning, although we repeat weekly that He will in the Creed. We expect that our end will be death and then Heaven. Paul explains that it really makes no important difference whether or not we die before the end of the world and the return of Jesus to judge the living and the dead. We shall all ever be with the Lord.

November 8th

I Thessalonians 5 vv 1-3

As I said yesterday, the expectation of Christ's Return seems to have faded somewhat from the consciousness of mainstream Christians. On the other hand, various sects always seem to be proclaiming that the end is nigh and think they have the evidence. What does the Bible say? This created order had a beginning and it will have an end. The beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, is Jesus. He will judge the quick and the dead. There is no way that we can know when that day will come, but we should always be ready for it. In times of tribulation we should *look up for our redemption draweth nigh*. (Luke 21²⁸).

November 9th

I Thessalonians 5 vv 4-7

The end of the world will be sudden and unexpected. On that day the dead will rise. Everyone of us will have to give account to God for the way we have lived. How we respond to His Love will determine our eternity. In several places in the Bible, the end is likened to the coming of a thief in the night. You don't expect him. You can't see him. You may not know that he has been until it is too late. But Paul reminds Christians that we need not be afraid. We are children of the light, not of the darkness. Living in the light, we can see what's what. We can see what we are doing. We know what is going on. Shifting the analogy somewhat, as children of the Light we do not perform the deeds of darkness, the deeds which will get other people into deep trouble on that day. But, given that we are children of light, we must act like children of light, always ready to meet our Lord.

November 10th (Remembrance Sunday)

I Thessalonians 5 v8

Next year sees the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, which will bring back memories both of incredible courage and endurance and of faithfulness to one's country, and also of all the horrors and carnage of industrialised warfare. We shall honour those who fought. We shall ask how it happens. As that generation did, we shall vow, *Never again*, but we shall make that vow conscious that WWI led to WW2 and that there has been virtually non-stop warfare somewhere in the world ever since.

Give peace in our time, O Lord,

Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.

There must be a better way. *But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.*

There is a more excellent way. That Way is Christ, but humanity, even Christendom has so far failed to find that way en masse. Yet:

*And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace.*

For God hath not appointed us to wrath.

Well, why would He? There seems to have been a tremendous shift in perception. Apparently in the past people thought it marvellous that anyone should be saved. God is just so holy that no-one is fit to come into His Presence. If anyone makes it to Heaven, if a faithful remnant is saved, that is extraordinarily gracious on God's part. If the majority of the human race (or indeed all of us) spend eternity banished from the Presence of God, it is only what we deserve for rejecting Him and disobeying His commandments. In recent years, we have become much more complacent. If God is good, we tell ourselves, He's bound to open up Heaven to absolutely everyone (except perhaps Hitler, Pohl Pot and paedophiles).

Actually, there is truth in both perspectives. It is marvellous if any of us sinful human beings is saved. It is extraordinarily gracious on God's part to prepare a place in Heaven for sinners like you and me. It can only be done through Jesus, the Son of God, offering Himself as a *full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world*. We can't even come to His table, trusting in our own righteousness, let alone expect to dwell in His house forever. We can't trust in our own righteousness, but only in His manifold and great mercies. We should feel very privileged, very loved, to think that there is a place for us at God's Right Hand in Heaven for ever. But also Christ is a *full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world*. The sins of the whole world are potentially forgiven in Christ. All human beings have to do is to accept His free gift of salvation – to repent and be baptised. It is God's Will that all should be saved (I Timothy 2⁴). I don't know how many will be saved or what proportion of the human race. Jesus wouldn't answer when His disciples asked Him (Luke 13²³). He just warned them, *Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able*.

Perhaps Heaven will be packed with people who just don't realise how wonderfully blessed they are. I hope so, but we do know and should live accordingly.

November 12th

I Thessalonians 5 v10

Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.

Paul means people who are alive and kicking in this life and people who are in the sleep of death. As he says above, both will meet Christ on the Last Day and both will dwell in His Kingdom for ever. God became man so that we might become divine (II Peter 1⁴). Christ died so that we might live. We have eternal life now, but partially because our vision of God is veiled by our human flesh, that flesh which wars against the Spirit and makes it so hard for us to live the life of the Risen Christ here on earth. When we see Him as He is, we shall be made like Him. We live in Him and the dead live in Him. So we live together in Him. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the communion of saints.

And a note on the Last Day. Time is a property of the material universe – along with space and energy or matter. Those who have left the material universe through death dwell not in time but in the eternal now. So there is no difficulty in thinking of those who sleep in Christ as having attained eternally while we wait in time for the Last Day or for the death of our mortal bodies whichever comes first.

November 13th

I Thessalonians 5 v11

Comfort yourselves together, and edify one another.

Paul's word translated here *comfort* is the verb form of the noun *Paraclete* or Comforter, the Holy Spirit. He comforts, strengthens, encourages, acts as an advocate on our behalf, mediator, intercessor helper. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwells everyone of us Christians. We are called to care for one another as the Holy Spirit cares for us.

*Brother let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

To edify is to build. Christians are living stones in the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are to build up one another, to help one another to attain the full stature of Christ. And we do all this in the light of the Resurrection hope.

November 14th

I Thessalonians 5 vv 12&13

We are all equal before God. There is one mediator and advocate. Every Christian may approach the Throne of God through Christ and there is no other way to God but Christ. The Church does not need priests in the OT or pagan sense, religious professionals who mediate between God and the ordinary believer. Christ is the High Priest Who has opened the way into the Holy of Holies for us all and all Christian people are kings and priests.

However, the early Church very soon discovered that it needed leaders – people who *are over you in the Lord*, in St Paul's words. It is important that Christians respect their leaders and support them in love. If the leaders are not worthy of respect, they should be replaced. If, however, leaders are properly appointed and faithful to their calling, those members of the congregation who seek to undermine them are in danger of working against God.

November 15th

I Thessalonians 5 v14

Do you ever get impatient with someone who is slow on the uptake? Or deaf? Do you sometimes deliberately decide not to include someone in a joke or in the general conversation because they probably won't get it and spoil it for everybody else? I am partially ashamed to admit that I do this sometimes. Only partially ashamed, however, because always to go at the pace of the slowest may mean holding everybody back. We do, however, have a responsibility to build up one another as Christians. That means not leaving the slow behind as well as not holding back the quicker on the uptake. Easier said than done, but if we love all our fellow Christians, we can't give up trying.

November 16th

I Thessalonians 5 v15

To render evil for evil is sometimes very tempting. One day, when I was in junior school, another boy pushed me into a patch of stinging nettles. The next day I did the same thing to him – both revenge and a deterrent against him or anyone else doing it again. I doubt if it made either of us a better person. As adults and as Christians we might find subtler ways of rendering evil for evil, arguing that the other person needs to learn his lesson or to protect others. Watch your motives!

November 17th (Second Sunday Before Advent) I Thessalonians 5 v16
Rejoice evermore. One verse, just two words. Rejoice evermore. Joy is the characteristic of the Christian. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is inseparable from love. It is what Jesus came to give us. It carries us through persecution. So both our churches this Sunday will be full of joyful people, so full that we are wondering whether to build bigger churches or to found new ones? No? Why not? There is original sin which blinds people to what is truly in their best interests. There is sin within the Church which makes us less attractive than we ought to be.

November 18th I Thessalonians 5 v17
Pray without ceasing.

How can we do that? We come to church on Sundays and maybe on other occasions in the week. We have a daily prayer time. But how could we pray without ceasing? When would we find time to do anything else? Maybe Paul means arrow prayers – those little prayers we say when some topic for prayer comes into our thoughts as we go about our daily routines. Maybe he just means, Keep on praying no matter what. But how about this? Could Paul simply be saying, Be always conscious that you are in the presence of God. Walk hand in hand with Jesus all day every day until you come with Him to the Promised Land?

November 19th I Thessalonians 5 v18
In everything give thanks.

I remember this used to puzzle members of college Christian Unions. CUs are often made up of intelligent young people reading their bibles properly for the first time. They receive it for what it is, the Word of the Lord. They study it avidly and naturally they come to things that do not seem to make sense. How can you give thanks for cancer or for being in prison or for abject poverty or for living in a war zone? I remember a sermon where this was explained. Paul does not write, *For everything give thanks*, but, *In everything give thanks*. Of course we are not thankful for bad things. But, by the grace of God, we can remain thankful when we have to confront bad things. We are not alone. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is with us *even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*.

November 20th

I Thessalonians 5 v19

Quench not the Spirit.

Some charismatics take this to mean that we should not reject phenomena such as speaking in tongues, healing miracles and other signs and wonders in the Church today. But the Holy Spirit works in many ways of which these apparently miraculous phenomena form only a small proportion. We ought to be open to the Holy Spirit working in all sorts of ways. In Matthew 13⁵⁸ it says Jesus *did not many mighty works there (Nazareth) because of their unbelief*. Could the lack of dynamism in today's Church be a result of our low expectations?

November 21st

I Thessalonians 5 v20

Despise not prophesyings.

A prophet, like an angel, is a messenger of God. The prophet brings the word of the LORD. Interestingly, Jesus is both a prophet and the Word. In the Old Testament, there seem to be two kinds of prophets – the big names like Samuel, Elijah and Isaiah who are best known for the word God gave them to proclaim, a word which has proved relevant to many generations and many nations, a word which is fulfilled in Jesus – and wandering bands of charismatics, who experienced phenomena such as speaking in tongues. The two kinds of prophet are by no means entirely distinct as you will pick up if you read the OT carefully. In the New Testament, there are prophets who bring the word of the Lord to particular situations. The gift of prophecy is linked with the gift of tongues but it is distinct from it. People speak or sing in tongues to God or to themselves. The prophet utters a word which other people can understand, though tongues too may be interpreted. However God chooses to speak to us, it is up to us to be attentive. God is at work in the world today and He may well have communications for us. He may speak to us directly or through other people. How do you recognise the authentic voice of God? Who is the true prophet? The key questions are: is the prophecy in accordance with what we already know of God (through the Bible and the corporate experience of the Church)? And Do his words come true?

Despise not prophesyings.

A prophet is a messenger of the Word of God. So where does the sermon fit into all this? *Sermon* comes from the Latin *Sermo* and means talk, address, conversation, discourse or even language. The sermon is a proclamation of the Word. The word of God written is the Bible. The Word made flesh is Jesus. The task of the preacher is to convey the Word of God to his congregation. It is not necessarily to entertain or to please them. There is more to preaching than teaching. The preacher's task is to seek to discern how the Word of God applies to the lives of the people in his congregation and its corporate life. The preacher seeks to discern and to pass on what God is saying to these people / this people today. Tuesday's topic reminded me of a sermon I heard preached at All Souls Langham Place nearly forty years ago. That was obviously a sermon which made a big impression on me.

Sometimes we get very little out of a sermon. There are poor preachers and even good preachers don't always get it right. However I don't think congregations are always fair to preachers. Do they come with the right expectations? Do they come to hear the Word of God, which might be comforting, but then again it might be discomfoting; which might confirm what we already believe, but might challenge us; which might require a bit of time to explain and a bit of effort to understand? Do they follow the example of the Jews at Berea and *search the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so?*

Feedback is useful to a preacher – whether people have understood, whether the message has made sense, whether it is relevant, whether it is Scriptural. Sometimes it feels like preaching into a void and one has no idea whether one's preaching is doing any good. On the other hand, the preacher must not court popularity. His task is to proclaim the Word of God whether the people will hear or whether they forebear. The congregation ought to be supporting him in that task/

November 23rd

I Thessalonians 5 v21

Prove all things.

Another short phrase which to me takes some understanding. Test all things. Examine all things. Put everything to the test. This is the sort of thing Paul means. Elsewhere the sense is of relying on God in all circumstances, or examining yourself to see what kind of person you are, or looking closely at the sort of lives you and other people are leading to see whether they measure up to the required standard for a Christian, or examining some proposed mode of conduct as to its fitness for a Christian to engage in. All these ideas are relevant to what Paul is saying here. Examine everything in order that we may *hold fast to that which is good.*

November 24th Christ the King)

I Thessalonians 5 v22

Abstain from all appearance of evil.

The hypocrite wants to look good even though he isn't. This isn't what Paul means here. Paul means that there should be no place for any kind of evil in the thoughts, words or deeds of Christian people.

November 25th

I Thessalonians 5 v23

Becoming what we are. Paul has said a great deal in this epistle about what it is to be a Christian. He has thanked God that the Thessalonians are Christians. And yet he has exhorted them to be what they are. He pushes them to become what they are. Now he is praying God to make them what they are.

I am very conscious of the gulf between my wonderful words about what it means to be a Christian and what I am, of the gulf between what the Bible says the Church is and what the actual Church to which you and I belong seems to be. There will always be that tension between the time that Jesus comes the first time and His Second Coming, the years between conversion and departing this earth to be with Christ, the Millennia between *Thou art Peter and on this rock I will build my Church* and the time when the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of God and His Christ. We are, however, on the side of the angels and seek grace to live as we really are.

November 26th

I Thessalonians 5 v24

Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.

We often talk about our faith in God. We talk less about God's faithfulness towards us. But God's faithfulness is more important than our faith. Our faith is the gift of God. Even so, given that we are human beings subject to the weakness of the flesh, our faith is often weak. There are many temptations in this world, many reasons to get discouraged. But God is faithful. God is true. God is merciful. God's purposes will be accomplished whatever the appearance of things. I might let my grip on God slip, but He won't relax His grip on me.

November 27th

I Thessalonians 5 v25

Brethren, pray for us.

The whole mission of the Church depends on God's faithfulness. Every individual Christian life depends on the faithfulness of God. In prayer we align our will with His Will, we bring our faith to His faithfulness. Prayer then is the breath of the Church. We support one another in prayer or, rather, we align ourselves with God's faithfulness to one another, His faithfulness to the Church and His faithfulness to the world which He so loved that He sent His only Son.

November 28th

I Thessalonians 5 v26

This is the origin of passing the peace in Church. It probably started literally with a kiss. In the Middle Ages they passed round a relic and kissed that. In England at the Reformation we stopped passing the peace altogether. In the last fifty odd years, passing the peace has been revived in England with varying degrees of enthusiasm. To those who reject the custom out of hand, I point out that it is Scriptural. Of those who go overboard with hugging and kissing people they hardly know I enquire whether they really think that the customs of the eastern Mediterranean 2,000 years ago necessarily translate well into modern British culture? Certainly we Christians are called to love one another as Christ loved us, but how are we meant to show it? I used to say that I'd rather you lent me £10 if I was hard up than shake my hand $\frac{2}{3}$ way through the service, but I'm not quite so curmudgeonly now!

November 29th

I Thessalonians 5 v27

Do you ever wonder how this collection of Law, Prophets and Writings, Gospels, Acts, Revelation and all these letters or epistles came to be regarded as Holy Scripture? It took a while. In NT times all the Jews accepted the Law, the five Books of Moses, the Torah, as having come from God, mediated by Moses to God's people. The books of the prophets were respected but not given as much authority as the Law. In the Hebrew Bible, history books like Joshua, I&II Samuel and I&II Kings count as prophets. The authority of all these prophetic books derives from the fact that they are an account of God's dealings with His people interpreted by the Word with which the prophets were inspired. The rest of what we call the OT – the writings – had less authority but were clearly highly valued. These three categories of book comprised the Bible for Jesus and the early Church though there would be and still is doubt about some books as to whether or not they should be included in the Bible. We call these books the Apocrypha.

The oldest part of the New Testament is probably epistles like I Thessalonians. We see here how already this letter was treasured and to be read to the whole assembly. It enjoyed the authority of the apostle Paul. These letters would be preserved, no doubt copied, and shared with other Christian congregations. In time other people than Paul wrote letters to the churches. Four men told the story of Jesus in the Gospels. Luke (probably) wrote the first chapter of Church history in Acts and John shared the Revelation God had granted him. Over a couple of centuries the Church came to recognise which of these books counted as Scripture, which were authoritative and canonical, to be read out in Church, to be believed and acted upon. Most of the NT was accepted quite early on though there were doubts about some books like Revelation and there were a few other books which some prominent people would have liked to have counted in, but were ultimately rejected. The final list appears early in C4, in an Easter letter of S Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. But in today's reading we see the beginning of the process of the canonisation of Scripture.

November 30th (S Andrew)

I Thessalonians 5 v28

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

As a child I used to wonder what grace was. I thought I knew what love and fellowship meant, but, what was grace? I learnt in due course that it comes from the same root as gratis – free. It is associated with grateful. But what is it? *There but for the grace of God go I.* Grace is a word which seems to cover a multitude. It is God's free gift. Grace makes it possible for us to be saved. In a way it is a power, the power to do what God wants us to do, the power to be the people God wants us to be. But power doesn't seem quite right for grace. In some ways power seems like the opposite of grace. Maybe grace is like virtue, but virtue is another slippery word with meanings ranging from goodness again to power. What superpower would you like? You could do worse than to ask for grace or virtue. Solomon asked for wisdom and was made wise by God's grace! Come to think of it, I now know that love and fellowship mean a great deal more than I realise. There are depths to plumb in these familiar phrases.

December 1st (Advent Sunday)

II Thessalonians 1 vv 1&2

We start this second letter to the Thessalonians with the typical Pauline greeting, salutation and blessing. It is good to use Christian greetings, but it can look a bit precious. I'm reminded of a story about a clergyman who always dated his letters by the saint whose day it was rather than by the ordinary calendar date. His bishop got a bit fed up with this and replied dating his letter *Bath Night!*

Some Christians defer to public by avoiding saying or doing Christian things when they are with friends who are not church people. They don't mention that they go to church. They'd never say they'd pray for anyone, etc. Some Christians, on the other hand, make a show of saying and doing what they think will make them stand out as special.

And then there are those who as Christians act naturally, without thinking about it unselfconsciously speaking and acting as people of love.

December 2nd

II Thessalonians 1 v3

Every so often we have visits from bishops and archdeacons. We send in returns regarding our church life. I'm sure they hear news of us from mutual friends and acquaintance. I wonder if, like Paul with the Thessalonians, they thank God for us or whether we are a worry to them. Do they observe our faith and love grow or are they anxious about us?

Of course, like the Queen who has never seen a piece of litter, bishops and archdeacons do tend to see us at our best – full churches, generous hospitality, warm welcomes, but they must know that it isn't always like that. I'm sure they hold us in their prayers as we hold them.

December 3rd

II Thessalonians 1 v4

We thankfully don't face persecution, but visitors from our diocese including our bishops and archdeacons do travel out to our link churches to share in their Christian life. We sometimes read about these trips in the diocesan newspaper. The Church in Estonia is a European Church with a European culture in many ways similar to ours, yet it is only a short while ago that it came out of decades of Soviet persecution. Estonia also suffers fantastically cold winters! There is very great poverty in Tanzania. Zimbabwe has suffered both poverty and oppression and the Anglican Church has been persecuted there. Our bishops and archdeacons and others from the diocese have had first hand experience of sharing with the Christians in all these places. Often the sense of these encounters has been of great joy and a real desire for fellowship with us. They must be very inspired by the example of these overseas churches.

December 4th

II Thessalonians 1 v5

When we see pictures of thousands of worshippers in some of these places, many of them very poor, some of them having walked for miles through snake-infested bush, or people who with a quiet dignity have kept the faith in the face of opposition, we do think them worthy of the Kingdom of God and look to them for an example for us.

December 5th

II Thessalonians 1 v6

A lot of scholars like II Thessalonians a great deal less than they like I Thessalonians. Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek and to pray for those who persecute us. This is the God Who does not desire the death of a sinner. So we may not be comfortable with Paul saying that the Church's persecutors will get what they deserve.

If we are the sort of people who think they can judge the Bible and decide for themselves which bits they will accept as the Word of God and which they'll reject as merely the opinion of Paul or Isaiah or some other biblical writer, we might be tempted to discount this verse and similar passages. Another strategy is to point out that for a number of reasons plenty of scholars don't think II Thessalonians is the work of Paul and to suggest that therefore this passage does not have apostolic authority. This approach to Scripture is like onion peeling. You might start off with the dry, brown, wafery skin which you can obviously do without, but when you keep going it is not so obvious where you stop. You keep slicing away until all the nourishing parts of the bulb are in the box destined for the compost heap. If we set out to judge Scripture rather than letting Scripture judge us, we finish up with a Church that doesn't stand for anything apart from contemporary culture and which might as well therefore not exist. The strong and growing churches are the ones which accept the authority of God. The churches which think they know better are the churches which are dying.

If, however, we humbly accept the Bible as the Word of God, we have to make sense of verses like this in the context of other Scripture.

December 6th

II Thessalonians 1 v7

The persecuted Thessalonians, all those good people sent to the Soviet gulags to such harsh conditions that many died, the decent people whose children starved while their neighbours lived on the fat of the land, the victims of thuggish police and an oppressive president, will one day rest with Jesus when He and His mighty angels are revealed from Heaven. At last, justice for the poor and the persecuted.

December 7th

II Thessalonians 1 vv 8&9

And the concentration camps and the brutal soldiers and policemen and the evil tyrants will also rest with Jesus on that great day when all shall be revealed. The camp commandant shall lie down with the Jewish children and the militias will sit down to dinner with the women they raped and the men they tortured and the child shall play in the gas chambers and an innocent victim will lead them.

I think not. *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* Don't mistake me. I'm not saying that the murderers and torturers, the cruel oppressors and the evil tyrants, the terrorists and the corrupt state security police cannot be saved. But I am saying don't sweep these warnings of impending judgment to one side. It would be an insult to their victims. It would call into question the Justice of God. Only the most astonishing act of self-sacrificial love could save members of the Gestapo or the militias which pillage the villages of Africa or the perpetrators of genocide or the torturers of political prisoners or the men who command them. Only the Cross of Jesus could save them (or any of us). Don't assume that God is too nice to punish. It really wouldn't be fair.

December 8th (Advent 2)

II Thessalonians 1 v10

One of the puzzles for Christian believers is the question of evil. If God is both good and all-powerful, how come there is evil in the world? One answer is that there is no such thing as evil. What we perceive as evil is only the absence of good. This hardly helps! Evil feels real enough. Another answer is that God grants us freedom – the gift of freedom being worth the consequences of allowing us to commit evil. Natural evil such as earthquakes is explained either because God allows the whole creation not just us humans freedom or because the forces of nature inevitably do harm in order to do good. Volcanoes for example create fertile soil, which is why people live near them. Another point is that in Jesus God shares with us the consequences of evil. He understands evil and deals with it. Whatever the reason God makes things as they are and allows them to continue like this for the time being, there will come a time when everything is made new and justice is done.

December 9th

II Thessalonians 1 vv 11&12

One of the funny things about the Church of England is that forty years ago we introduced a modern form of the Lord's Prayer, which nobody else seems to have adopted. This has left us out on a bit of limb. When visitors or newcomers turn up at our services they can't join in the Lord's Prayer even if they know it. What is easy to overlook in this discussion is that the modern version is no easier to understand than the old. We change thou to you, but we're still stuck with hard words like hallowed and temptation. It's impossible to think of simpler or easier alternatives. The more I think about the Lord's Prayer, the more I realise there is in it. I'm using it more and more in my personal devotions. Even to say, *Our Father*, says so much about our relationship to God and to the human family, the people we are related to, our church congregation, our neighbours, our friends and colleagues, our country – the whole human family.

What about *hallowed be thy Name*? Paul prays *that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and ye in him*. What does this say about our honouring God, by what we do and say, by what we think, by the people we are? What does this say about God honouring us by adopting us into His family and giving us His Name? What does it say about the impression of God other people receive from our behaviour as people known to be Christians?

December 10th

II Thessalonians 2 vv 1&2

Throughout Christian history, there have been people who were sure that *the end is nigh*. Where they have persuaded large numbers of other people, sometimes the results have been catastrophic – thousands of people going out into the desert without provisions to wait for the Lord, for example. In Thessalonica some people were apparently saying that Jesus was about to return and the world was about to end. They might have claimed authority as charismatics, whom some people might have imagined to receive direct communications from God. It appears that some claimed to represent Paul. As always, test what people claim to be the Word of God by what has already been revealed. We do not know when the end will come. When it does come it will be unexpected. There is much to go through before it happens.

December 11th

II Thessalonians 2 vv 3&4

There has been a great deal of speculation as to who this *man of perdition* might be. According to W Neil, he has been equated with the Jewish people, the Roman Empire, Nero, the Pope, Napoleon, Hitler or Stalin according to the commentator's predilections – not to mention Antiochus Epiphanes from the Apocrypha. It is better to think of this man of sin or son of perdition as a mythological figure close to Satan tied up with the events of the final battle between good and evil (Revelation 12), the Antichrist. It is not inappropriate however to think of the spirit of Antichrist as active in some of the worst tyrants in every historical period, men who have considered themselves as above God and persecuted and oppressed the poor. A falling away of the faithful and great wickedness on earth are only to be expected before the End. It is human nature. But Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the Cross in perfect love for God and for His Creation is more powerful (more gracious, more virtuous) than all the power of the Evil One. So the battle continues and we don't know when it will be over, but we do know that we are on the winning side. *Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.*

December 12th

II Thessalonians 2 vv 5-9

This is tough going. Paul has already told the Thessalonians that Jesus will not return before certain terrible things happen. People will fall away from faith. This Antichrist will be revealed. In part you could say that the spirit of Antichrist is present in all the evil tyrants who oppress good people, but the implication seems to be that there will be one worse than them all and that then God will intervene. Jesus will return. Heaven and earth shall pass away and there will be a new creation in which righteousness dwells. Until that great day, things will continue as they are. Jesus says that the world is like a field in which the Owner has sown good seed but an enemy has sown weed seed and the weeds grow up with the wheat until harvest time. Then God will send His angels to gather in His Harvest and the wheat will be separated from the tares.

For we know that thou wilt come, and wilt take thy people home,
From thy field will purge away all that doth offend, that day;
And thine angels charge at last in the fire the tares to cast,
But the fruitful ears to store in thy garner evermore.

December 13th

II Thessalonians 2 vv 10-12

The devil is the father of lies. False gods are illusions. Idols are vanity. They are nothing. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Those who believe lies and those who tell lies are doomed. Maybe the greatest lie is *man is the measure of all things*. People who think they can manage without God and tell other people the same might not find out how wrong they are until it is too late.

December 14th

II Thessalonians 2 v13

It is all of God. It is a mystery that we are free to choose and that yet it is all in the hands of God. Some freely choose perdition and some freely choose salvation and yet they act in accordance with divine providence. Paul thanks God that his Thessalonian Christians have chosen the path of life. This doctrine of providence is not to make us complacent that we are saved or to think that other people maybe among the unsaved. *Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things ye shall never fall.* (II Peter 1¹⁰). Part of our Christian life will be to bear witness of Jesus to others and is not for us to judge them, rather that we should remain faithful. [Today is Mary Sumner Day. Mary Sumner was the founder of the Mothers' Union. It sticks in my mind that as a young curate I was asked to take a MU bible study on II Peter 1¹⁰. I found it quite hard to understand and even harder to explain and I am not sure the group got very far. Still working on it, however, even after all these years.]

December 15th

II Thessalonians 2 v14

Whereunto he called you by our gospel.

The Thessalonians had been called by God, had been elected or chosen, through the preaching of the Gospel. As Paul asks in Romans 10, how will people find faith, if they never hear the message. The 1950s generation decided they didn't need to go to Church in order to be Christians. The 1960s generation found more exciting things for their children to do on Sundays than Sunday School. The 1970s generation decided that it was not the duty of schools to impart Christian faith to pupils. The 1980s saw shops opening on Sundays. Christianity was gradually squeezed out of public life. And where have we got to today?

December 16th

II Thessalonians 2 v14

To the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Christmas Gospel, we shall hear the words *He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.* (John 1^{11&12}). The sense is that the whole world is His own and the whole world has rejected Him but for a faithful remnant who through faith in Him become the children of God. It is a wonderful privilege that we Christians have obtained and are obtaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. But it is deeply frustrating that so many of the world which God so loved that He sent His Son for its salvation through ignorance receive Him not. It is a reproach to us who have obtained the glory in this land that we have allowed a situation to develop in which people never hear the Gospel. What are we going to do about it? I guess Christmas is one great opportunity when people might be a little more receptive than usual.

December 17th

II Thessalonians 2 v15

Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold fast the traditions which ye have been taught.

This word *traditions* might grate on us. Jesus often rebuked the Pharisees for following their traditions and failing to recognise the always new Law of God and what God was doing anew in His eternal Word made flesh. Paul establishes enthusiastic, exciting new churches, which he warns against adopting the dead traditions of a dying version of Judaism. We often suspect that our traditions are what put off new and young people from coming to church. So why is Paul commending tradition here? He means that there are certain fundamentals which are not negotiable. Certain beliefs are the *sine qua non* of being a Christian. The Thessalonians have been taught these basics. The Gospel is a gift with which they have been entrusted. It is to be carefully maintained. It is to be believed from the heart. It is to be transmitted to the next generation of Christians, a gift which keeps on giving. Jesus said, *therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like a householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.* (Matthew 13⁵²). So that's what we have to do.

December 18th

II Thessalonians 2 vv 16&17

I think sometimes that people who hear sermons and maybe readers of notes like these feel got at. The preacher or teacher points out the contrast between what we are supposed to be as Christians and what so many of us actually are. Even when the preacher admits that he is just as bad as his audience, it can all seem very discouraging and depressing. It hardly seems like that we are peddling a religion of joy and freedom in the Spirit. The alternative – cosy chats which encourage complacency – is even worse, robbing the Gospel of its power to transform lives. Remember that we started these notes with the complaint made by Paul's opponents at Thessalonica that people believing in Jesus had turned the world upside down. So which is it to be? Complacency or a permanent sense of failure?

Well, it ought to be neither. Either implies that it all depends on us. Either we try and fail or we stop trying and make do with second best. But it doesn't depend on us. It depends on God, on Jesus. So says Paul here. So he prays that Jesus and God will establish us in every good work. Maybe we preachers should preach more often on *Let go and let God* (even though it isn't in the Bible). Neither being content with what we have, nor a crushing sense of failure that we have not achieved more, but freedom in the Spirit to do Christ's work in the world.

December 19th

II Thessalonians 3 v1

Pray for us that the word of the Lord may have free course.

We've thought a lot about the difficulties of proclaiming the Gospel in modern Britain. How about starting with prayer? Praying for preachers and teachers of the faith. Praying for opportunities to preach the Gospel. Praying for preachers who encounter resistance, opposition, difficult questions and challenges. Pray for Christian leaders in the special temptations they face. Pray for missionary organisations at home and abroad. Pray for personal opportunities for you and me to share our faith. Pray for individuals whom we would love to become Christians. Pray for the work of the Church overseas proclaiming the Gospel – sometimes as a persecuted minority, sometimes as a highly successful majority, sometimes in material poverty, sometimes rich, sometimes in war zones, some times in peace, but always in the Lord.

December 20th

II Thessalonians 3 v2

We don't always realise how much persecution of Christians goes on in the world today. Only the most dramatic events hit the news and then usually only if they involve white people. We can find out more about what goes on. There are organisations which hold persecuted Christians in prayer and seek to support them. We can take the trouble to read the small print articles on the foreign news pages of our newspapers. We can think about the implications for Christian minorities of big news stories. Christian minorities in the Middle East for example are very often held responsible by their neighbours when supposedly Christian Western governments intervene militarily in Moslem or Arabic states. Palestinian Christians are squeezed in the conflict between Moslem and Jew. A more Islamic regime in Egypt may put even more pressure than its secular predecessor on the Coptic Christian minority. Communist and former Communist countries like North Korea, China and Vietnam persecute Christians. So does supposedly Buddhist Burma. In other parts of the world Christians may have to consider how far they can compromise with a brutal dictator in order to maintain a position in society from which they hope to do good. Some Christians feel a vocation to keep abreast of all these developments, to pray for them and to do whatever else they can. All of us should pray generally for the persecuted and for particular examples which do come to our attention. We always remember the persecuted especially at our Eucharist on Fridays, the day of Jesus' own martyrdom.

*That it may please thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*

December 21st

II Thessalonians 3 v3

But the Lord is faithful.

People who think that the story of God's people is one of one triumph after another have never read the Bible. The Bible more or less starts with the Fall of man. From then on it is failure after failure on our part. We are weak and disobedient. Left to us human beings, even Jewish and Christian human beings, the world would have ended in disaster long ago. The reason it hasn't and it won't is that God is faithful. What we have to do is to keep faith with Him.

December 22nd

II Thessalonians 3 v4

We have confidence in the Lord touching you.

Do you have confidence in the Lord touching me? Do you have confidence in the Lord regarding other people in our congregation? Do I have confidence in the Lord concerning you? The point is that our confidence is in the Lord. We might very well have doubts about one another. But our confidence is in the Lord. Our prayer for one another – and we must pray for one another – is, that by God’s grace, we shall all keep faith with Him.

December 23rd

II Thessalonians 3 v5

This morning at Holy Communion, the reading was from Deuteronomy 6. *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.* This commandment was to be written up on the doors and gateposts. It was bound into their clothing. The commandments of God were to be a regular topic of conversation among the Israelites. And, perhaps most important of all, God’s commandments were to be taught to their children. The love of God – His love for us, our love for Him. Patient waiting for Christ. Another translation has the fortitude of Christ – our strength in Him, His example of faithfulness to the end, His inspiration. Paul prays for these things because they are the gift of God.

The Deuteronomy reading went on to warn of the danger that when the Israelites settled in the Promised Land and life was comfortable and easy they might well forget God and His commandments. The consequences would be devastating. It doesn’t take too much imagination to apply this warning to modern Britain.

December 24th (Christmas Eve)

II Thessalonians 3 v6

Christmas is a season of peace and goodwill to all mankind. I hope today that you are anticipating a warm celebration of the Birth of Christ with the rest of Christ’s Church and with family and friends – an anticipation of Heaven. It’s hard to read this verse today – the warning that there are those with whom fellowship is impossible because they don’t accept fellowship with us. Something to pray about.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

II Thessalonians 3 v7

Paul often encourages people to follow him in following Jesus. He tries to set a good example. He tries always to preach and teach the truth. To know God is to have eternal life and *vice versa*. Those of us who have the privilege of knowing God – it is incumbent upon us to share this knowledge with other people. Our experience of Christ is reflected by what we say and do, by the people we are. God is born into the world today. He is born in our hearts. Some people think the way we cradle our hands to receive the Communion bread is an icon of the baby Jesus lying in the manger. We are born again in Him. Our life in Him bears witness of the One Who is the Resurrection and the Life. Our Christmas joy commends the joy Christ came to bring to the world.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;

Cast our sin and enter in: be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell:

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

December 26th (St Stephen)

II Thessalonians 3 v8

It seems odd to be thinking about working for food today. I expect many of us have been eating too much and are perhaps thinking that we will soon need to ease off a bit. I expect your fridges and larders are packed as well. No need to worry about working for food just yet.

Paul, the apostle, is of course the same man as Saul who looked after the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death. Only he is not the same man. He has been converted. He now knows Christ and this knowledge both transforms Paul and constrains him to preach the Gospel. He cannot help himself but share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

He undertook all those long, arduous and hazardous journeys. He put up with stonings and floggings and imprisonment. He undertook the care of the churches. He just had to share the Gospel and one of his tactics was to keep himself. No-one could say that Paul was sponging on his congregations. He worked with his own hands to keep himself and his assistants. So no-one could impugn his motives in establishing churches.

December 27th (St John)

II Thessalonians 3 v9

Paul does not deny that ministers should live off the offerings of the faithful. Indeed he implies that this is normal (I Corinthians 9). There have been and are, however, disgraceful occasions in the history of the Church when ministers have been greedy, deliberately working on the fears and hopes, even the love of their people, and grown rich on the offerings of people much poorer than themselves. I am not comfortable when public servants such as the chief executives of local authorities draw enormous salaries and enjoy wonderful pension arrangements at the expense of taxpayers many of whom are much worse off than they are and when services to the genuinely needy are being cut because of insufficient funding. I am even less comfortable with the heads of charities being paid large salaries out of the freewill offerings of their supporters and when there is so much need in the world for charities to meet. I know the argument – that you need to offer generous pay if you are to attract the best people to do such important work. Perhaps I am naïve, but I do not believe that good people are motivated by money. Certainly the clergy ought not to be motivated by money nor to expect to be kept in luxury by their congregations. I realise, however, that this does raise the question of what a fair rate of pay should be. I know that, counting the fact that I live rent and mortgage free, I am a lot better off than many of my parishioners. I also know from my own work with a charity that many clergy with families find it a struggle to keep them in style which would generally be regarded as acceptable in C21 England. The apostle John is believed to have given Mary a home in her old age. He couldn't have done that if he hadn't had a house.

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

II Thessalonians 3 vv 10-12

People who expected the imminent end of the world might have thought it wasn't worth working. The early Church was generous to its members who were in poverty and some lazy people may have taken unfair advantage of this generosity. The devil then may have made work for idle hands, people with not enough to do going out and making trouble for other people. Of course we are engaged in a big debate about welfare, how we provide for people in genuine need, but don't encourage idleness. Paul says that those who won't work shouldn't eat. A good principle but how distinguish *won't* from *can't*?

December 29th

II Thessalonians 3 v 13

But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.

As I write this I'm wondering what will happen tomorrow. We've laid on a special event with a speaker about an important subject. Will anyone come? So far no-one has indicated an intention to attend. If there are few or no people there it will be a waste of the speaker's time and an embarrassment for me. I remember I once agreed to host a meeting in one of our churches and the only audience were the speaker's wife, my dog and I. Not as bad, however, as the committee I heard about who had actually booked a cabinet minister for their meeting and, when they realised no-one else was coming, they too were scared to show up and the minister arrived to a completely empty hall!

It's not just the embarrassment and the waste of the speaker's time. The project we had been hoping would receive support in fact won't get it.

It can be discouraging when there is a lack of response. The clergy also can be depressingly unresponsive. Someone comes up with a good idea and we can only see the pitfalls – the favourite being, *We've tried it before and didn't work!*

And yet. A little while ago we recalled the parable that Jesus told about the world being like a field in which the wheat and the tares are growing together and will only be separated at the end of time. He also told another simpler parable (Mark 4²⁶⁻²⁹) about the farmer who sows the seed in his field, time passes and in due course there is a crop to harvest. He doesn't know how the seed grows. It just does. He plays his part, ploughing and sowing, weeding maybe, fertilising, etc., but what really matters is the fact that seed naturally grows of itself. Similarly God's Kingdom. We have our minor parts to play, but it is God Who makes the Kingdom grow. God's Kingdom is inevitable. That is why we should never be discouraged.

December 30th

II Thessalonians 3 vv 14&15

Back to the vexed question of the recalcitrant church member. What do you do with those who refuse to accept legitimate authority? They can do so much damage to a fellowship, setting some members against others, distracting the Church from its essential mission, bringing the Church into disrepute in the wider community, promoting schism, undermining some people's faith, introducing doctrinal error and wrongful practices. And yet the Church is the Body of Christ. He Himself prayed for her unity. He Himself commanded us to love one another as He loves us.

Paul recognises that there may have to come a parting of the ways for the sake of the well-being of the whole Christian community. And yet, this person is not an enemy. He remains a brother. The hope always is for the restoration of fellowship.

December 31st

II Thessalonians 3 vv 16-18

Paul may well have used a secretary to write his letters. If it is true that, as many people believe, he had poor eyesight, he may well have been very glad of the opportunity to do so. It looks as if he signed them himself in order to guarantee their authenticity. The implication of v17 is that, if those scholars are correct who believe that Paul did not write this letter, it is an intentional forgery. I can just about accept that some writers subsequent to Paul might have described themselves as Paul because they believed they were writing in the spirit of Paul. But I find it very hard to believe that what the Church has always received as Scripture was a deliberate forgery. Other people may not agree with me, but I think that we must accept this epistle as genuinely the work of the apostle. If we don't, we're back to onion peeling – slicing off layer after layer, throwing all the nutritious parts on the compost heap, and finally left with nothing.

Leaving that aside, we finish the epistle as we finish the year with God's peace and grace and the prayer that the Lord will be always with us – a fitting start to a new year and the rest of our lives.

