**Sunday 13th Nov 2022. A community that remembers - 1 Thess 3v5-13**

***5****For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.*

***6****But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.****7****Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?****10****Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*

***11****Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.****12****May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.****13****May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

On Remembrance Sunday it is so important to look back and give thanks for all those who have given and continue to give so much in order that we can meet freely in this place this morning. We can perhaps take our freedom somewhat for granted, when the current situations in places like Ukraine, Hong Kong or Sri Lanka are a sobering reminder that freedoms can be curtailed overnight by unchecked political ambition or some economic or environmental catastrophe. Freedom is hard won and previous generations have borne the cost over the years for our sakes. As the epitaph by John Edmonds says ‘For your tomorrow, we gave our today.’

It is also important to remember together because honouring personal sacrifice and the nation’s perseverance through times of past suffering is crucial for cultivating humble character and also future resilience. As Paul wrote in Romans 5v4 ‘we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.’

Martin Luther King Jr once said ‘The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy’. But as we have seen time and again that it is not only the amazing faith and courage of individual heroes, but the sense of community coming together to face up to challenges that inspires us all to keep standing firm when the going gets tough.

Our Bible reading from Thessalonians this morning is all about coping with adversity, and how the community that remembers its roots and heritage and values its cultural memory is the community that stands firm in times of trial.

During our series we have seen how the Apostle Paul wrote to congratulate the church in Thessalonica for their faith, hope and love and how he wanted to encourage them and spur them on despite the hardships they were experiencing.

Our passage today starts with the words ‘*for this reason, when I could stand it no longer I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and our labours might have been in vain*’. Dave Parr shared from the previous chapter last week at the Sanctuary service how Paul was concerned that the church were experiencing suffering and persecution. But here we see Paul admitting to being anxious that somehow the Thessalonian church might be tempted to quit following Jesus when things were challenging.

I always find it reassuring that Paul writes openly about his anxiety over the state of the churches. On the one hand we know that Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount ‘Do not worry about your life’ and Paul himself wrote ‘Do not be anxious about anything …’ and yet here in this letter we see Paul describing his experience of inner turmoil and anxiety. But don’t you find that encouraging! God’s word is so gracious! We are not simply presented in the Bible with the lofty state of holy perfection. Instead holiness is described in raw detail as a journey of evolving trust in God and the lived experience of battling our natural human weaknesses by God’s grace and seeking God’s peace that goes beyond understanding through prayer.

But clearly too much anxiety can be bad for the soul. So how do we manage it? Is there good anxiety and bad anxiety? How do we know which is which?

Well in some sense all action is initiated by anxiety – the desire to achieve a better outcome. We need to be conscientious in order to make progress.

The difference is whether the anxiety is driven by fear or love. Bill Hybels described what he called ‘a Holy dissatisfaction’ which is a God-given motivation for change. But then there is also unhealthy anxiety which the devil can use to shackle us to fear.

John 1 says there is no fear in love and perfect love drives out fear. If our anxiety is driven by fear of exposure perhaps through some hidden sin or selfish ambition or angry motive, then that sort of anxiety that needs to be confessed and brought into the light for the Holy Spirit to do some surgery on.

Recently I have been reading the authorised biography of Eugene Peterson called ‘A burning in my bones’. He wrote ‘The Message’ paraphrase version of the Bible and is a great hero of mine. The book draws on a rich collection of letters, prayer journals and conversations and it describes someone who was deeply grounded in prayer, had extraordinary Biblical scholarship and pastoral sensitivity, yet was also all too aware of his own insecurities, shortcomings and imperfections. His desire to be a down-to-earth saint is truly inspiring. He wrote ‘The strongest sign of authenticity in what you and I are doing is the inadequacy we feel most of the time.’

Part of the growing curve of faith is seeing time and again that as we commit things to God in prayer, He comes through for us and brings everything together for good. But we need to learn how to remember what God has done. I think Paul wrote down this letter as soon as Timothy arrived back with his good report partly as a testimony to himself and his readers of God’s faithfulness.

The Thessalonians were a church of good character who remembered their origins and calling. To Paul’s great joy and delight, Timothy returned reporting that they had endured. They kept going, strong in faith hope and love. And instead of sending news of discouragement or discord they sent Timothy back with good news of growing faith and warm memories of Paul’s teaching and fellowship.

That is the Pastor’s joy and crown. The knowledge that despite everything, the church is standing firm and pressing on together in the Lord. In fact, Paul goes further and states that for him the key to *really living* is seeing people growing in faith and love for the Lord. The Greek verb Paul uses is ζάω – which means to live in full vigour – it’s what Jesus said when he promised that Whoever believes in him will have rivers of *living* *water* flowing from within them.

This morning after some months of hard work by Sheila Carrick and her team, it was a privilege to switch on the freshly repaired Weston Village water fountain again. After lying dormant for over 100 years it was refurbished in 2011 in time for the Easter passion play with the Lord providing the money in amazing ways. But during Covid it developed a fault and only worked for a couple of months earlier this year. During one of my first services at All Saints I happened to mention how I’ve always longed to be in a church with a real fountain as a symbol of the living water of Christ bringing beauty and relief to people in the community. And here we are, Praise the Lord, this church now has a working fountain. OK it’s not exactly Trafalgar square, but a fountain it is nevertheless!

The fountain is a prophetic reminder that it is the ζάω, the living water of Christ that is the hope for our community and our village, and real life comes as we see more people standing firm in faith.

As the living water flows in this church we need to invite more people to experience it. At our away day on Saturday the PCC and staff team prayerfully reviewed where we are as a church and the key area for growth and development was in the whole area of evangelism. Sharing the living water of Christ with all who are thirsty.

Last Saturday afternoon the Boys were with us so we got our Bath residents cards and decided to go and visit the Roman Baths. Clearly I am not an experienced Bath resident yet because I thought it would be a good idea to drive everyone into town. Needless to say, I had to drop the others off and come back to Weston to park. I couldn’t find a working scooter so I ended up walking and running to try and make our booking slot. I made it. Just. And it was lovely. But I was really thirsty. I did my best to concentrate and learn all about the Romans and water systems, but soon all I could think about was getting a drink. Everywhere in the Roman Baths there were signs saying ‘do not drink!’ When we got out I thought to myself ‘great – now we can go and get a drink’. But no, Mims wanted to pop into an art Gallery in passing. Eventually I got really grumpy. “I just need a drink!!!” Thankfully, we then went and found a drink.

People are spiritually thirsty too. Their lack of spiritual water is just making society grumpier and grumpier, and more and more frantic. But Paul describes the secret to refreshed life – it is to be immersed in the water of life, amongst people standing firm in faith, not flailing around and losing hope.

As I said in my first talk here at All Saints you have done really well to come though the Pandemic and a vacancy with your faith in tact and hope in your hearts. Well done good and faithful servants! However, that doesn’t mean you can hang up your bibles and just chill out for the next 10 years. The Weston fountain is a symbol of all the good heritage of faith sharing over the years at All Saints. We remember that and give thanks. But now that it is switched on again, we have to keep putting one foot in front of the other and keep rebuilding together. We have been given the immense privilege of sharing the water of life with thirsty people so we need to make the most of this amazing opportunity.

Paul’s joy spills out onto the page as he gives thanks for the Thessalonians’ endurance and faith. He says ‘**9**How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? **10**Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

There is always more. Although the Thessalonians had been commended for their endurance, Paul goes on to say he wants to come and impart more to them. In fact the word he uses means to completely, restore, and repair.

The children held up a wonderful banner at last week’s engage service that said ‘let us start rebuilding’ and it was a profound Holy Spirit moment. So like Paul, I am praying night and day that this church will be restored to firing on all cylinders.

In the final verses Paul changes to prayer mode as he writes, asking the Lord to help them rebuild in 3 particular ways:

Firstly he asks that the Lord would clear the way for him to return. Where people have been separated they need to be together. After the pandemic we need to be together, seeking the Lord together.

Secondly he asks that love would overflow both inwardly and outwardly to others. We need to balance our love for each other with our love for the community.

Finally he prays that God will strengthen their hearts to be blameless and holy in God’s presence. We need to seek the presence of the Lord for this season and resolve to live lives of holiness together.

Strong hearts with love overflowing. That is what we need to pray for today as we remember all that God has done. Let’s stand.