

Sunday 9th October 2022: Inspired by hope

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a A community to be thankful for.

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

It is a joy to be sharing God's Word with you this morning – it has been nearly 4 months since the interviews for the post of Rector of this Benefice and preaching here is one of the scenes that goes through your mind as you wonder *what will it be like?* Well here we are, and already I can see that thankfully you are a lovely bunch! Mims and I have been very blessed by everyone's kindness as we have moved from Weston-super-Mare. Thank you so much.

I was very blessed to have a sabbatical during the summer and I spent some time down in Somerset at our friend Keith Powell's place in East Lyng. The weather was gorgeous and I was able to spend some time just reading and praying sat amongst the apple trees in the orchard. One of the things I was asking God about was what book of the Bible we should start with here at All Saints and what was on God's heart for this community for such a time as this. As I read through various passages of the Old and New Testament I landed on Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It's one of Paul's earliest writings – in fact other than Galatians and James, it is amongst the first of the New Testament books to be written and it is crammed full of heartfelt encouragement for growing in discipleship and living a life of love together in community. Sounds good doesn't it? But I wanted to know if this was actually the Lord, or just my own thoughts. So, I asked him again a month later – OK Lord what do you want me to speak about on Sunday 9th October? Immediately I was led to look at this Bible in a year book that I keep for quiet times, and lo and behold, what is the reading for Sunday 9th October? 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1 starting at verse 1. So here we are and I am convinced the Lord wants to speak to us out of these verses this morning as we launch a new sermon series and also a new season of ministry.

This morning we're looking at just the first 5 verses, so let's begin with the first line:

Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

The first thing to note is that Paul addresses his letter from himself and also two others. Silas and Timothy were Paul's trusted companions in the faith. Silas was his prayer partner who handwrote Paul's letters on his behalf, Timothy was a young man Paul was training up as a leader. The basic foundation of church life is having some close friends who will pray and support us through thick and thin. At its core, Church should basically be a place where you feel safe enough to be fully known. Where you journey along with a few others who you permit to know the real you. The monastics call them soul friends. We all need friends and especially soul friends. This week I made it my priority to wander into the village for lunch sometimes with my dog collar on just to see who I would encounter. But I said to Mims it feels like I am walking along with a big sign hung around my neck that says 'I need friends!' Well I think if we will admit it that is true for all of us. The extroverts here need loads of friends, the introverts need just a few close friends. But God has made us all for companionship and the Apostle Paul was no different.

John 15 tells us that Jesus said to his disciples *'I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.'* Jesus linked fruitfulness with friendship.

The church is designed to be the kindest place of deep soul friendships with the Agape love of God as the glue that holds it all together. But building a loving community takes effort, and truck loads of grace and peace. Which is why Paul writes those words in his opening greeting of his letter: *Grace and Peace to you.*

I feel like my initial work here as I start off as Rector is to echo these words and to bless you with reassurance that everything will be ok.

Coping with the Covid pandemic along with a vacancy is a really tough call for any church to cope with. But the truth is that by God's grace you have endured. God wants to do amazing things in this community and in this city through us working together. Well done good and faithful servants – just hear these words over you from verse 2:

² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith, Hope and Love. The most powerful things in the universe.

1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that when all is stripped away, all of humanity's marvellous progress and achievements will fade into insignificance except for faith, hope and love. I am an engineer and I love to see things working well, buildings that are beautiful and practical, systems that are efficient and helpful, technology that is innovative and intuitive. But all that is worth nothing without faith, hope and love. We could be the slickest church with the best publicity and the smartest facilities, but it will all fade away if we don't build our house on the rock of Jesus Christ and the love he gives us.

But I want to encourage you today. I see that this church is built on faith, hope and love, and for over a thousand years the message of Jesus has been proclaimed to this community on this site. This is sacred space, this is hallowed ground. Our lives are but a breath in God's amazing Kingdom plan, but nevertheless we are privileged to be present for such a time as this.

As I was praying over the summer about being called here to All Saints, a few things stood out as important clues along the way. Hopefully you had a look at the Parish profile but it shows an exciting church with a heart for the community and a committed team of mission minded people. On Thursday evening I heard a former community police officer publicly thank All Saints for all the amazing things this church has done for the community over the years. It was a ringing endorsement and you should all be encouraged – it is wonderful to see all that is happening. This is a church for all people wherever they are in Weston. It not only preaches the Word but acts upon it too. I love the fact that both the Pepper group and the Youth run services every month in the evenings - an amazing thing to be cherished and nurtured.

Children, Young people and seniors are all honoured here and my priority has always been to invest in them with time and staff resources. I made a commitment at the age of 7 just under the bed covers one night and the Lord has always been faithful to me since. Childlike prayers of faith are sometimes the most powerful so we need to keep prioritising youth and children's ministry.

My sister came here during Tim Watson's time when we lived in Wick the other side of Lansdown. She came to Bath, I went to Hanham Baptist which is where I met Mims. But Louisa loved her time here. She gave a great report of a church family that loved her and looked after her after she was a student. There are a growing number of students living at this end of the city and I know Ben is on the case looking out for them – let's continue to welcome them.

At its heart, the Rock project is about making this church building user-friendly for the next generations of the whole community of Weston. It is a big challenge in the current economic climate especially given that the church tries to operate on minimal reserves.

But as Rob shared with you last week, where God calls, he equips. He has always been faithful and as we pray, we will see again that he is Jehovah Jireh, our provider. Sometimes that is costly for us – but I have discovered you can't out-give God and he rewards those who step out in faith.

10 years ago, I went on a pilgrimage of faith with a friend of mine called Dan. We thought it would be good to hitch hike from WsM to Oxford to stand and pray at the Martyr's memorial in St Giles. We were first picked up by a pair of Polish painters from Portishead, but somehow, we ended up in Bath along the way. I called my friend Sky Cady (remember him?) and he arranged for us to stop for the night at this place called the Coach house just up the street here. It was better than a 5-star hotel! But what I remember is the generosity of the couple who happily welcomed a random pair of hitch-hikers and blessed us with prayers and breakfast. Turns out it was Beryl and Graham Leigh who I met again for the first time on Tuesday morning. Kindness is key.

In the moments before my interview in June I spoke to Simon the caretaker on my way in. I asked how long he had been working for the church and he told me just a few years 'and I love it' he said, 'everybody is really kind!' Wow - these things were so important. A kind church, generous to strangers, investing in children and seniors. This is a community to be thankful for.

Paul not only commended the Thessalonians for their faith hope and love, but he goes on to remind them that they were chosen by God to be people not just of words but power.

⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

This church has a wonderful history of welcoming the Holy Spirit and seeing his power at work in people's lives. It was an honour to have Tim Watson pray for me on Monday night, and over the last 35 years under the oversight of Tim, Patrick and Mark, there has been a wonderful openness to the things of the Spirit in this Church. I want to honour and thank them for all their work and prayers leading God's people here. The Word and the Spirit have been likened to the two wings of God's presence. We need to proclaim God's Word, and also welcome the Holy Spirit to work through us to bring healing, wholeness and transformation to the whole community.

A healthy church manages to maintain not only the balance between Word and Spirit, but also the balance of Upward, Inward and Outward facing ministry. We look up in Worship and prayer to God, we look inwards to care for each other's needs and we look outwards in Mission and evangelism, following the Holy Spirit's lead to love the lost.

What I observed during Covid was that many churches (including my own) lost some momentum in mission and evangelism as we needed to focus on caring for each other. Now don't get me wrong, pastoral care is important, but now I sense the urgency is pressing to redress the balance outward again. We are in a great place to be able to help people this winter with our facilities and our caring community groups, and I hope we can launch Alpha again in January. Will you join me in praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance as to where and how to sow for a new harvest?

We are living at a time of great challenge and rising anxiety, but faith in Christ is the antidote that people need to hear and experience. It didn't look good as Jesus hung dying on that cross, but he could see the joy set before him, the resurrection to come and the new life that he would offer to anyone who believes it.

This is the hope that inspires. The reason for our faithful endurance and the motivation for our love and kindness. Jesus has already overcome – so we are able to receive his grace and peace today and share it with our whole community.

Let's stand and once more ask the Holy Spirit to come and enable us to move forward with faith, hope and love.