

Sunday 23rd October 2022. A community of safety.

1 Thessalonians 2v1-12 Paul's pastoral ministry

2 You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. **2** We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. **3** For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. **4** On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. **5** You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed— God is our witness. **6** We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. **7** Instead, we were like young children among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, **8** so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. **9** Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. **10** You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. **11** For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, **12** encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

This is the third week of our sermon series *Inspired by hope* looking at one of the apostle Paul's earliest letters, written to the church in Thessalonica which is now the modern day port city of Thessaloniki in Greece, some 200 miles north of Athens.

In chapter one, we saw how Paul commended the Thessalonians for their faith and love and for their 'endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Tom P shared those wonderful verses last week about how the Lord's message rang out from them as they learned to imitate the Lord and how they exhibited the hallmarks of a model Christian community: Resisting idolatry; resilience through suffering, treasuring God's word, welcoming people from different backgrounds and rich generosity.

Thomas a Kempis wrote a classic Christian book called 'the imitation of Christ' based on that phrase, because following Jesus is all about learning to imitate him. To imitate someone we have to spend time with them and if we spend long enough with people we will naturally take on their mannerisms. You might have noticed that I might sometimes pronounce my words with a Somerset twang. That's from 13 years of living with people in WsM, (as well as singing along to 'I got a brand new combine 'arvester!' a few too many times!). But the more time we as disciples start to spend with Jesus, the more we will begin to look and sound increasingly like him, and then those around us will definitely begin to notice. It's quite a challenge for us to become imitators of Christ in all we do and say - it takes a lifetime of grace, forgiveness and starting again when we get it wrong to become true reflectors of his light and presence. Thomas a Kempis wrote 'We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ.'

In his early letters Paul often wrote boldly: 'Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ' (1 Cor 11v1) which sounds a bit arrogant in our day and age! But is that something we can or should aspire to say today?

Well it all boils down to *Trust and Trustability* (my made-up phrase for trustworthiness) and this week we are heading into chapter 2 of Thessalonians, where Paul starts addressing the whole area of trust, sharing his pastoral heart for the church and gently challenging their perceptions of his ministry and the gospel.

Trust is the backbone of Church life. Trust is the basis of our faith in God as we rely on the historic reality of Jesus and all that he did for us on the cross and through the resurrection. We trust in his promises. But then there is also the trust bond of true Christian fellowship – the commitment we share together to grow and serve one another through good times and bad.

Research has shown that trust is a key contributor to wider social and economic wellbeing. Over time trust can be built up or eroded to such an extent that simply asking the question whether people can be trusted gives a good indication of the likelihood of a whole country to grow economically.

Every year researchers gather data for something called 'the World values survey' and the results are fascinating. One of the sets of data collected is

called the 'Trust index' which is the percentage share of people agreeing with the statement '*most people can be trusted.*' The countries with the highest percentage such as Norway, Sweden and Finland (and interestingly China) have over 60% in agreement. The lowest trust levels are found in places like Columbia, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru with only 10% trust. How does the UK fare on the Trust index? Well it is in the middle of the range at 30%. It is quite sad to think that only 1 in 3 Brits think that most people can be trusted, but perhaps what is more concerning that the trust index in the USA and other countries in the West is decreasing over time, because the evidence also suggests people who say they trust other people tend to be trustworthy themselves.

Trust and therefore I suggest, good faith, are being challenged at every level in our society – you only have to look at what has been going on in Government in recent months to see that the stability and the safety of the nation is so dependent on the perceived trustworthiness of its leaders.

Another poll is conducted in the UK every year to assess which public professions are trusted to tell the truth. Doctors are at the top, with teachers following a close second. Unfortunately politicians and journalists don't fare well being bottom with only around a quarter of people thinking they can be trusted. Clergy are currently in the middle of the pile at 64% but the great sadness is they have fallen from having the top spot in the 1960s.

We can all think of reasons why that is. We hear tales of moral failure, financial abuse and coercion. And yet nearly 2000 years ago Paul was highlighting the same issues, and wanted to assure the Thessalonians that they could trust him. In verse 3 he says 'For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you' and in verse 6 he continues: '5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness.'

Trust takes ages to grow, but can be destroyed in a moment. I know that one of the questions you will be asking about me as I start working at All Saints is 'can this bloke be trusted?' Well all I can say is that the proof will be in the pudding – you can really only judge a tree by its fruit and that will take time. But I can assure you that one of the first things I feel the Lord has asked me to do here after you have had to cope with the Pandemic and a vacancy is to be a safe pair of hands, steady on the tiller, keeping the main thing the main thing, which is fixing our eyes on Jesus and seeking first his Kingdom and his

righteousness. I hope you will indeed find me trustworthy – but what does that look like in practice?

Paul uses three fascinating word pictures to describe the way his team behaved in a trustworthy manner among the Thessalonians. Remember the letter is addressed from Paul, Silas and Timothy and in verse 7 he firstly says ‘we were like young children among you’, which is fascinating. But then in verse 8 he says they were like a ‘nursing mother caring for her children’ and then in verse 11 he says ‘we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children’!

So sometimes like children, sometimes like mothers or fathers. In other words the basic unit of trust in the church is to be like family. We have to relate to each other.

We are firstly to be innocent as infants, not loaded down with bitterness or scepticism, open to learning new things, not having all the answers. We are to be gentle and tender with each other like mothers nurturing their babies, and also at times paternal or protective like a Father with his children. Sometimes we might need to exercise parental discipline and at other times we just need childlike wonder, humility and dependence. But first and foremost, we are a family of faith committed to do life together.

I’m not sure what your experience of family has been. For some family means trust, care and unconditional love. Others will have experienced sadness, loss or even abuse. But God’s family needs to be the safest on the planet.

And yet the devil wants to steal, kill and destroy starting anywhere he can get a foothold. So that is why safeguarding is so important for keeping everyone safe at church. Clair Hurley and Karen Kopp are our wonderful safeguarding officers and they are like the Old Testament gatekeepers of the temple. Welcoming in the good, keeping out the bad.

Now the nature of church life means there will be safeguarding concerns along the way. People are people after all, and stuff happens. But it is the way we deal with it that marks us out as caring and compassionate. We all have a duty of care to protect and care for everyone in our community, especially children and vulnerable adults, and it is vital that we organise ourselves to prevent harm taking place on our watch. If you are concerned that something isn’t right here at All Saints then I take that seriously. Flag it up by emailing

safeguarding@allsaintsweston.org.uk and Clair and Karen will try to respond the same day.

It only takes one incident to trash all the wonderful kingdom work that takes place over many years in an organisation. We must be diligent and can I ask that when Karen or Clair ask you to renew your training or update your DBS, please thank them for all they are doing and cheerfully get it done. Cheerful safeguarding is an act of worship to the Lord. Let's be safe for God's sake!

Finally, as well as safeguarding, we need to protect each other emotionally with prayer, practical support, and pastoral care.

I receive emails from my friend David Bute who is a Church leader living in central Ukraine. He has been writing every day since the beginning of the war describing what is happening in his community and among his staff and the church members. Yesterday he sent a picture of a huge fire at their local electricity substation which was targeted in the last couple of days by Russian drone attacks. David is naturally worried and concerned for his people – he is their pastor and Father figure. He's been teaching on bravery a lot – but admits in his emails to be feeling a lack of courage in recent days. But that is where like children admitting vulnerability, the church will actually grow closer to one another. A truly safe community is self-aware, fully dependant on God and fully interdependent with each other. No-one is impervious. We all need each other to safely endure all the challenges that lie ahead.

In a few moments we're going to share communion, our shared meal to remember that through his death on the cross, Christ won the victory over sin, the world and the devil. It is our communal declaration that because we trust in him, we can also trust in each other as his body too. Let's stand together and pray.