

First a quick introduction to 1 Thessalonians as we move on to another letter of Saint Paul.

This letter, written about 51 AD, is probably the earliest document in the New Testament.

The gospels, although they tell of events before 33 AD were actually written up a little while later nearer to 70 AD.

So in this letter, we have an interesting emphasis on the imminent return of Jesus.

The early church thought Jesus would return very soon, and part of Paul's writing, in this letter and 2 Thessalonians is telling the church to be patient; to get on with living out the Christian lifestyle and with proclaiming the Christian message, and not just sit around waiting for Jesus to return.

Thessalonica was to the north of Greece on Paul's way to Athens and Corinth in the south. And as Paul moves on from town to town he is followed by others seeking to undo his work and turn the local communities against the new churches.

So he writes to encourage those early Christians in their trials.

He gives instruction, as always, in godly living; urges them not to neglect daily work

because the Second Coming is not yet, and to reassure them that those who die before Jesus returns will still be secure in their place in heaven.

Some of these are not issues that bother us.

Two sides of the coin

Proper 24  
(Trinity 17)

Matthew 22. 15 - 22  
1 Thessalonians 1. 1 - 10

But encouragement in the face of difficulty and also his teaching about the Return of Jesus are of interest to us today.

In this first chapter he gives thanks for the Thessalonian Christians reminding them of his time with them and how they did not just hear his message but they experienced the touch of God and the power of God, for themselves.

verse 4,5

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

This is really important.

I was at a PCC meeting in another parish this week trying to give some encouragement to a village church that was struggling.

They were asking,  
how to persuade others to join the church.  
And my answer was, bring them  
to where they will feel the touch of God.  
I fear most people in that church  
have not felt the touch of God.  
So these Thessalonians had joined the church

become Christians,  
not because they were convinced by Paul's preaching  
but because they experienced God in a personal way  
and this backed up what Paul was saying.

We need to be sure  
that we too know the truth of the gospel message  
because we have experienced its truth.

At the most basic level,  
each of us needs to know that we have a father in heaven  
who loves us,  
because in our time of need  
we have felt God holding us in his hands.

Unless you know by experience  
that you are a Child of God,  
words will not be enough.

I told them, at this village church,  
about someone who came to us one Tuesday morning,  
troubled, distressed, but mysteriously drawn here,  
as if this church held some sort of answer.

Frances and I listened to her,  
grieved with her, and prayed for her.  
And that Tuesday morning, sitting here in church,  
she felt God touch her, hold her and comfort her.

So she believed the words, and came again,  
and still is a member of this church.

The Thessalonians experienced the power of God,

they encountered the Holy Spirit  
and were convicted of the truth of the gospel.

They changed their lives  
turning from their idols and false religion  
to serve the Living God.

And they were living out this new way of life  
waiting eagerly for the return of Jesus,  
or the end of their lives, whichever came first.

Paul had to encourage them to a bit more living and working  
while they were waiting.  
And of course we know, they didn't,  
that the wait was not a few days or months  
but year, centuries, millennia.

And so we too work and live as Christians  
as if Jesus were about to return tomorrow  
but not seeking to hurry him in any way.

The passage from Matthew  
with Jesus in conversation with the Jewish leaders  
takes place in a similar context.

Those who knew who Jesus was - the promised Messiah  
thought that perhaps the end of the age was very near.

How are they to live?  
Can they throw off their duty to the secular power  
and just look forward to God's Kingdom.

We have the same question today.

Certain faith groups, Muslims in particular,  
would like to live by their religious law  
and ignore the requirements of the Law of the Land.

So it is all right to deny women their human rights.  
It is all right to kill unbelievers,  
as if they were badly behaved animals.  
We don't agree with that.

But as Christians, there are other areas  
where we now differ from the Law of the Land.

We want to protect the rights of the unborn child  
while the Law gives mothers the right  
to determine whether they live or die.

Less important maybe, we want to keep Sunday special  
while the Law of the Land says  
it is no different from any other day  
and you can be forced by your employer to go to work.

Christian hoteliers want to choose  
who is allowed to share beds in their homes  
but the law of the land says they must allow  
the unmarried, and gay couples  
to behave like husband and wife.

Christian adoption agencies  
want to choose who may take their babies  
but the law of the Land makes the choice for them  
or they must close down.

In almost every walk of life

family, employment, child-care and care of the elderly and infirm  
life and death, health and welfare  
our society now is at variance with our faith.

You can see this very clearly in the current debate  
over the American Presidential elections.

Must we pay taxes to Caesar?  
Must we obey a secular authority  
when we think it has gone horribly wrong?

Jesus says yes, except in the particular details  
when the law conflicts with God.  
Then, and only then, must you stand firm

But in the midst of this secular world  
as we work for a living  
and serve our society,

we will also experience the power of God.

Because God walks the earth.

Jesus has gone to heaven,  
and has not yet returned to the earth  
but by his Holy Spirit, in the lives of believers  
God walks the earth today  
and he walks with you and me.

We cannot always see what God is doing.  
We may not always discern those through whom God is working  
We cannot see God's big clear picture.  
But - there is a picture.

If we walk the way God calls us,

*Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar  
and give to God what belongs to God*

then God will walk in this world  
and reign in this world.

He needs people to experience his power  
even before they believe.

That is how the Thessalonians came to faith.

We need to speak of God's love  
minister his love  
and pray for his love  
into the lives of others.

We will read more of Paul's instruction and encouragement  
to that early church.

In the mean time, let it encourage you  
like those Thessalonian believers  
to be a model of God's love and power  
in a hostile and unbelieving world.

And so may we win others for God's kingdom.

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## Setting the Scene

Road sign quiz -  
can you guess the meaning -  
before it is fully uncovered?

Now that wasn't really about road signs -  
it was about how things can be hidden  
and you don't really know what they are.

But God sees a clearer picture.

In the bible reading -  
some people asked Jesus a question

"Should we pay taxes to Caesar?"

What they saw - was a chance to catch Jesus out.

If he said "yes" - the Jews hated the Romans -  
and wouldn't like it.

If he said "No" - the Romans would be after him.

Either way he was in trouble.

They saw a trap for Jesus.

Jesus saw a chance to teach them something.

"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar -  
but give to God what belongs to God!"

It was an unbelievably wise thing to say.

As long as Caesar - the Romans - are in power  
they are the lawful authority  
even if you don't like them  
keep their laws - pay their taxes.

But if they tell you to do  
what God says you should not

or if they tell you to stop doing  
what God says you must - like prayer and worship

then don't do what they say -  
do what God says.

Then - they should have seen great wisdom  
and gone away thinking.

Instead they saw Jesus escape their trap  
and they went away angry.

Today's theme is about Jesus' answer  
how we are part of the world  
rules, laws, taxes  
but we are also God's people  
with a special identity - that is different.

**More later**

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