

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, August 7, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
I Thessalonians 1:2-10
Letters to the churches: Thessalonians

Colossae. There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that St Paul ever visited Colossae. It was a small Greek town in the western part of what we now know as Turkey. In Greek times, it was an important trading city, though its importance was declining in New Testament times. The church there was established through the preaching of Epaphras. Paul calls Epaphras *our beloved fellow-servant and a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf* Colossians 1:7. It seems that Epaphras had shared with Paul a concern he had about false teaching that was creeping into the church in Colossae and in nearby Laodicea. His concern was that this false teaching might distract the Colossians from the Gospel and bring them into spiritual complacency. It was the church in Laodicea that was accused in Revelation 3 of being "lukewarm" and told that it would be spat out of God's mouth. Paul's letter to the Colossians was written to address that concern. His Paul's reply was that believers in Jesus Christ had been given fullness of life in the One who was master over every ruler and authority. And for that reason, they were in a position of confidence and faith to stand against false teaching.

And as we saw last Sunday as we were looking at the letter to the Philippians, for Paul it was a matter of the interplay between Christology and ecclesiology. Paul's understanding of what it meant to be the church – his ecclesiology – grew out of what he believed about the person of Jesus Christ – his Christology. He expressed what he believed about Jesus in different words from the words he used in Philippians 2, but they are still glorious words: ¹⁵*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;* ¹⁶*for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him.* ¹⁷*He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* ¹⁸*He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.* ¹⁹*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* ²⁰*and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross* Colossians 1:15-20.

And in chapter 2, he moves to his reason for writing to *the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae* Colossians 1:1. He wanted their hearts *to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* Colossians 2:2-3.

Part of that assured understanding, that knowledge of God's mystery, had to do with the way the believers were to live out their faith in a culture that was at best unsympathetic, and at worst hostile, to the Christian faith.

And on the face of it, it seemed to be so simple for Paul. He framed it as a choice, pure and simple. The choice was between right and wrong, between good and evil, between light and dark, between *things that are above (and) things that are on earth* Colossians 3:2.

On the one hand, what he called *whatever is earthly*: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, dishonesty, discrimination. And on the other hand, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, love, harmony, peace,

thankfulness, wisdom, gratitude, song.

And all it takes, Paul seems to be saying, is the determination to hold to the one and reject the other; to seek the one, to set our minds on the one, to clothe ourselves with the one, and to put to death the other. And at all times, to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Sounds simple enough, but life is rarely simple, nor is the Christian life. The things that are on earth are potent and compelling. They have the power to hit hard against higher things in the lives of followers of Jesus Christ. All it takes is the loss of a job, or a troubling report from a doctor, or an encounter with a drunk driver, or a lunatic with a gun or a knife or a bomb, or even the kind of rhetoric that we have heard coming out of the United States in the last couple of weeks.

Any of these can drag followers of Jesus down from the things that are above. Any of these can leave us struggling to hold on to faith and hope and love and the determination to build a better world.

Paul seems to have known that. Because before he addressed these things in our text for today, AND while he was addressing them, AND after he had addressed them, he kept on reminding the Colossians of something that he wanted them to hold on to: that, whatever may happen in the world around us, followers of Jesus can and should find confidence in the life they now live, now that they *have been raised with Christ ... (and their) life is hidden with Christ in God Colossians 3:1,3.*

I want to close this sermon today in the same way that I closed my sermon last Sunday – with some words of Paul himself. As I read them, I invite you to ponder them, and let them speak directly to you. *you have stripped off the old self with its practices ...*

(you) have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator ...

in that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free ...

Christ is all and in all ...

as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ...

bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other ...

just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive ...

clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony ...

let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body ...

be thankful ...

let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God ...

whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him ... Colossians 3:9-17.

Thessalonica. Presently the second-largest city in Greece, and the capital of the province of Macedonia. In New Testament times, it was a major trading city, lying on the intersection of two major trade routes: the Via Egnatia, running east-west, and the north-south route through the Balkans.

Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, and Acts 17 tells the story of his time there. For three sabbaths he preached in the synagogue. He did run into some opposition, and had to be smuggled out of the city for his own protection. Nevertheless, as a result of his preaching, some of the Jews and *a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women* became followers of Jesus Christ.

But there are indications that he may have stayed longer than just those three sabbaths. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9 he reminded his readers of what he called his labour and toil: *we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God*. That suggests that he stayed longer than a couple of weeks, long enough to find make money to support himself and his preaching.

1 Thessalonians. Not long before this letter was written, Paul's colleague, Timothy, had visited Thessalonica. The letter is a direct result of that visit and what Timothy reported to him about the situation there. It is not a deeply or formally theological letter; it's more of a personal letter of encouragement to a community of believers for whom Paul clearly had great.

That respect and affection are obvious from our reading for today. In 1:1 Paul addresses his letter to *the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. That's quite formal, the kind of customary greeting that we find found at the start of several of Paul's letters. But by 1:4, he is calling them *brothers and sisters beloved by God*. And he tells them that he and Timothy *always give thanks to God for all of you*, and that they mention the Thessalonians in their prayers, *constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ* 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3. Faith, love and hope: the same three virtues that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 13, even if they are in a different order here. That connection alone tells us something about the kind of feeling that Paul had for his readers.

Part of that feeling was about how the believers in Thessalonica had responded to the Gospel when they heard it: *our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ... you became imitators of us and of the Lord ... you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit* 1 Thessalonians 1: 5-6.

But it didn't end there. Having come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the Gospel, *you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia ... the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you ... in every place where your faith in God has become known ... the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you* 1 Thessalonians 1:7-9.

As I have said several times in this series of sermons on the letters of the New Testament, Paul very deliberately chose the places where he preached the Gospel. He selected places where there was the greatest possibility of the Gospel not only taking root, but being carried out from there throughout the known world. He chose major cities, he chose ports, he chose places that lay on the routes that traders passed through regularly and frequently.

And it seems that his strategy paid off, not least in the case of Thessalonica. The Thessalonian Christians were known to be believers in Jesus Christ, word about them had spread, people in the regions around were talking about them and the way they lived and the welcome they had given to Paul and Timothy.

There was something about the Christian community in Thessalonica that had an impact on the wider community. It was something that, in the best possible way, started tongues wagging. It was something that people noticed and that got them talking. And the result was that the Gospel spread and God's kingdom grew.

If you have been in worship here in New St James for the last few weeks, you will know that a group of us are about to start studying Kennon Callahan's book, 12 Keys to an Effective Church. I don't want to steal anyone's thunder. I am not trying to steer the study in a particular direction. But I was intrigued by one thing that Callahan says as I was reading the book before our first meeting this week. And I connect it with today's text.

Callahan talks about legendary congregations, congregations that have one major mission outreach that is well known and well respected as a legend in the community. And he asks what comes to the minds of people in the community when they hear the name of their congregation. I want to read you what he says there.

If it is a committee meeting and a line-item budget (that comes to their minds), we are in trouble. If it is a location and a building, we are a little better off. Mostly, we have this mission strength well in place when people say, "Oh, that is the congregation who loves children ... that is the congregation who helps the poor ... that is the congregation who loves alcoholics ... that is the congregation who loves the elderly ... that is the congregation who loves sports kids ... that is the congregation who is helping in the schools.

What was the legendary mission outreach of the church in Thessalonica? Was it their work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ? Was it their joy in the face of persecution? Or was it the way the word of the Lord sounded forth from them? It could have been any or all of these things.

Whatever it was, they were a legend in their community and beyond. It made an impact on their community. It started tongues wagging. People noticed it and talked about it. And the result was that the Gospel spread and God's kingdom grew.

It couldn't possibly be as simple as that. Could it?