

Today is Bible Sunday, and we'll be continuing our short sermon series from 1 Thessalonians that Rach started last week.

As an evangelical, the bible is important to me, so important that I'm committed to us as a church and individuals getting it right, not accepting glib proof texts to make a point – too many of us have suffered at the hands of those who have done this in the past, nor going along with the way the world is changing and rating scripture as something to be considered alongside other equal views.

Let's pray – Lord, may I correctly handle the word of truth this morning and may we all hear you speaking to us through it. Amen.

Today in these verses from 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13(NB) we see a side of Paul that it's easy to miss – a tender side, a gentle side, yet a strong side.

St Francis de Sales wrote 'nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as great strength'. (take time to let those words sink in – let's hear them again - 'nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as great strength'. Paul had undergone the life-changing experience on the Damascus road, struggling to be accepted by the church in Jerusalem, and had changed from being a persecutor of the Christian church to facing persecution for the sake of the developing Christian communities he'd started as he travelled. This was particularly true in Philippi, as we saw a few weeks ago, and also in Thessalonica as Rach highlighted last week.

Please find a bible as we look in more detail at 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 for a few minutes now. Did you know that 1 Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament, written around 20 years after Jesus death and resurrection, and more than 10 years before the first gospel. It's a letter tackling issues of faith, relevant 2000 years ago, and still relevant today. In chapter 1, Paul, Silas and Timothy, people the Christians in Thessalonica knew well were thankful to the Holy Spirit's working in the church there, in particular (ch 1:3) their work produced by faith, their labour prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Work, labour and endurance, produced by, prompted by, inspired by faith, hope and love. So to chapter 2. It takes courage to proclaim God's word, as Paul, Silas as Timothy knew all too well. Describing (2:1-2) their shameful treatment in Philippi, so visually described in Acts 16 and 17, Paul comments on their suffering, yet they (v2) relied on the help of God to tell the gospel to the people in Thessalonica in the face of strong opposition.

Just reflect on this – often, if we suffer difficulties in sharing the good news of Jesus or even our friends and family reject what we've shared, causing us hurt (not many of us have faced the severity of persecution that Paul and his friends did) we give up, or at least don't want to face the prospect of being hurt again. Not so with Paul – having faced suffering in Philippi, they preach the gospel in Thessalonica, only for the same thing to happen again.

It's exactly 10 years ago today that Helen and I moved into the Vicarage at Cudham and Downe, and in a few weeks 10 years since I became vicar. There were some in my last parish that did cause me suffering, heartache, trauma, even, and I know some of you know,

but I guess many of you don't know that I arrived here bruised, but not quite broken, and yet reflecting on verse 1 I know my time there was not in vain. One person I spent time growing in faith is now a licensed lay minister. Like Paul, I decided to continue to share the good news of Jesus. Paul's courage is founded in confidence in the Gospel, despite the setbacks that he faced. And although there have been some here who have caused me pain, there have been gospel sharing opportunities during these last 10 years as we've together studied the word of God, prayed, and worshipped. Long may that continue. Why is this perspective important – Paul tells us why:-

Sharing the good news v3-6

Sharing ourselves - v 7-12

Sharing in the sharing v13

- 1) Sharing good news – V3-6. Is preaching, teaching, sharing the good news just a matter of opinion? Some would say it is, even other Christians, but Paul makes the claim this is not so, and shares something of the motivation behind all good preaching, teaching and witnessing. It's not a clever use of words to try and trick people, nor from wrong motives. Have a look at v4 – handling the bible is like handling something very precious, delicate, beautiful – like a piece of jewellery. Paul's years of learning had stood him in good stead. He knows the source of his calling, (v4) approved by God – and the outworking of this is to be entrusted with the Good News of Jesus Christ. All godly preachers and teachers take this seriously, and pray that I might do the same. He knows how easy it is, and maybe some false teachers were doing this in Thessalonica, to use flattery, and to say things to please people, to say what they want to hear. This was something frequently condemned by the Old Testament prophets who would try to please the king, instead of warning him of the danger of not following God. It's a bit like not warning someone there's a fire in case you upset them! Sometimes handling God's word means sharing uncomfortable truth, and as a preacher I know I need to hear those truths too!
- 2) Sharing ourselves V7-12 Have a look again at v7 – or rather don't – it's a difficult verse to translate, but because of what follows, I think it's better if it reads, as other translations do, v7 as 'we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother takes care of her children'. What an image, and how surprising to hear it on the lips of what we associate with the images of St Paul – here's he's being tender, like a nursing mother, soothing the one at her breast, providing necessary nourishment to see the little one grow. Can we hear God's word like that? I know I'm sometimes reluctant to show my softer side, and this verse spoke to me. In the verses that follow Paul could be accused of being self-defensive, speaking as he does about working 24/7, not being a burden, and it's clear that false teachers in Thessalonica were trying to undermine Paul's reputation. It's so easily done, to see church leaders, frail human beings as they are, to put them on a pedestal, only to knock them down when they fail to live up to the ideal we've set for them, ideals we'd never subject ourselves to. But look again at v7-9 and Paul also reminds them of the Gospel of God – no matter how imperfect he or others are, says Paul, what really matters is that the gospel of God – the free gift of grace won by Jesus death on the cross, life with God forever, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is received and shared.

3) Sharing in the sharing V12-13. He then moves from being like a mother, to being like a father (v12), encouraging, comforting and urging them to grow and mature as Christians, and the challenge that rings throughout the bible, especially the gospels and Paul's letters, to live lives worthy of God – in other words, to become who God has called us to be, his beloved children, citizens of the kingdom of God, people filled with the glory seen in Jesus Christ - that's who we are, now live as if that is true! Following on from our amazing calling as God's loved ones, Paul ends where he began, V13 praising God, despite all the trials, persecutions, challenges he faced in Thessalonica and elsewhere, to see that God changes people's lives, and on this bible Sunday, to see that God's word changes lives – v13 -the word of God which is at work in you who believe. Just as the food we eat has an affect on our bodily health, so too taking in God's word has an effect on our spiritual life. Don't neglect the word of God – why not try out our Wednesday homegroup, now on zoom? Why not spend time daily with God's word? We'll be launching an online Christianity Explored course soon, working through the gospel of Mark – that's another great place to start, or to refresh our love for God and his word.

So, to conclude- Paul not only shares with the Christians in Thessalonica God's word, but also himself. Let's pray that we will continue to do that here at Cudham church, equipping one another, supporting one another, sharing God's word and our lives.