**Love for and joy in God’s flock** 27/8/23 dkm

Read: Isaiah 62, 1Thessalonians 2

Text: 1Thessalonians 2:17-20

Psalms: 31:19-24, 1, 40:13-17, 134a

After many years of ministry in India the Lord called us back home. Saying farewells to brothers and sisters at the railway station brought some tears, but something they said to us has remained with me ever since. In saying goodbye they said, ‘If we don’t see again on earth we will see you in heaven’. In French *au revoir* means ‘till we meet again’ but *adieu* means ‘to God’. Our *goodbye* once meant ‘God be with you’, but the expression of our Indian brethren was most touching, and indeed true for fellow believers.

The apostle Paul was in Thessalonica only 3-4 weeks, before he was forced to leave. In this brief time he did not exactly ‘fall in love’ with those who believed in Christ but came to love them deeply as brothers and sisters in Christ. He has already spoken of being like their nursing mother, and like their guiding father (2:7, 11). The word he now uses is literally, ‘being orphaned’, or ‘being torn away from you for a short time’ (2:17). We do not use such language when we leave our employer or when we leave our coach. We use such language when our child goes off to boarding school or college, or gets married. We also use this language when being separated from a brother or sister in Christ, if we love one another as Jesus tells us to, and as Paul describes here in this letter.

We have learned so much about Paul’s love for these new believers in the church at Thessalonica already. We will learn more today under three subheadings: ‘Torn away’, ‘Try to return’, and, ‘Together at Christ’s coming’.

**1. Torn away**

Paul was overjoyed to hear from Timothy that the believers in Thessalonica were continuing in the faith; he had sent Timothy from Athens to see how they were doing (3:1, 2). After preaching in the synagogue on just three Sabbaths, the Jews rose up against Paul and the gospel he preached. They started a riot from which Paul and Silas narrowly escaped. A local believer called Jason, and some other believers, were dragged off to the authorities. They were released after posting a bond of some sort (Acts 17:9).

But the rioters it seems, continued to harass the local believers. They did so by trying to undermine the integrity and credibility of the apostle Paul. They accused Paul of being charlatan, a pompous preacher interested only in himself. Like the devil himself, they twisted the truth, saying that Paul had run off, never to return. In fact, they had chased him out of town with threats of violence.

In this letter Paul reminds the ‘brethren’ that he did not run off but was torn away from them. He hoped and prayed that this separation would be for a ‘short time’ only because his ‘great desire’ was to see them again. ‘Desire’ translates a word that is otherwise translated as ‘lust’ or ‘passion’. It is a strong or great desire which in this case is for good not evil, as in ‘lusts of the flesh’. Some translate the word as ‘covet’, which also has negative connotations but can refer to something good. The brethren in India previously referred to often said they coveted our prayers. Another superlative expression of Paul’s ‘great desire’ to see them is, ‘endeavoured more eagerly’. Paul did not, as we say, ‘leave any stone unturned’ as he looked for an opportunity to get back to Thessalonica and see the brethren face to face.

Paul answers the brethren in Thessalonica that although absent in body he was present with them in his heart (2:17). He thought about them and prayed for them all the time (1:2), even as he longed to be present with them. Paul could not ‘FaceTime’ these brethren as we do. He could not even pick up the phone and talk to them. He could not even put a letter in the post. We could at least post letters when we were in India 30yrs ago. Communications have made a quantum leap within our generation! Paul wrote letters, as in this letter we are reading, but he had to find someone to carry it to the recipients. How blessed we are that Paul’s communication was not a phone call but a letter that has been preserved for almost two thousand years.

**2. Try to return**

Despite what his detractors were saying, Paul had not forgotten these Thessalonian infants in Christ. He loved them as a mother ‘cherishes her own children’. They knew why he left them as he did, and he wanted them to know the ongoing pain of separation he was experiencing. So why had he not returned? He writes, ‘We wanted to come to you’ (2:18) - but realising that Timothy had come, and maybe Silas also, Paul speaks of himself in the singular, ‘I Paul again and again’ wanted to come to you.

Paul initially went to Berea, then to Athens and then on to Corinth where he stayed for one and a half years, and from where he wrote this letter. The church at Corinth was growing, despite similar opposition from the Jews, and later faced similar challenges with regard to sexual immorality and false teaching.

So why had Paul not returned to Thessalonica? He tells the Thessalonians that, ‘Satan hindered us’ (2:18). Before you think that this is a good excuse, maybe one you have used at some time- ‘Satan made me do it’ - remember that Satan is a real spiritual being. These new believers obviously understood the reality of Satan as our spiritual ‘adversary’, also called the devil. There are Christians today who do not even believe in the existence of Satan, and many who pay no regard to his activity or power. On the other hand, there are Christians who have become paranoid and fearful of Satan. Paul knew that Satan is active and powerful, but that he could be resisted with the word of God (1Peter 5:8, 9).

Paul saw Satan as ‘filling the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 5:3), just as he had entered the heart of Judas to betray Jesus (John 13:2). Satan tempted Jesus but failed to get him to sin. Satan was not tempting Paul but was hindering him (2:18). Satan was allowed by God to attack Job, taking away his children, his possessions and his health. Paul had his ‘thorn in the flesh’ as a messenger of Satan (2Cor 12:7), and some think it was ill health that prevented Paul from returning to Thessalonica. Others think it was the fact that Jason had posted a bond with the authorities, and Paul saw these authorities as agents of Satan. If Paul returned, and there was another riot, Jason might have lost his bond, whatever it was. Paul certainly did not want to make life any harder for these believers, but we simply do not know how Satan hindered Paul.

What we do know is that Paul believed in Satan’s existence and his power, his power to oppose the gospel. Paul knew he was in a spiritual battle for the souls of men and women: ‘We do not war according to the flesh’ (2Cor 10:3, Eph 6:12). Paul also knew that ultimate power belongs to God, and to Jesus Christ risen from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God. The cross and the resurrection mark the defeat of Satan, even though he continues to attack the church and harass the people of God through temptations and afflictions, often using human agents. Have you seen Satan attacking yourself, or others? He doesn’t attack people who reject Jesus because they belong to him already (John 8:44). Did you resist Satan, standing firm in the faith and in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ? (1Peter 4:9, 1John 3:8).

**3. Together at Christ’s coming**

We hope to visit a lady who ‘turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God’ during our time in India. She became dear to us as we nurtured her in the faith- and then we left. We try to keep in touch, and understand that she continues in the faith. We pray for her every day but are excited at seeing her again. Moreover, we give thanks to God in the knowledge that we will see her in the presence of Jesus when he comes. She was among those farewelling us with the words, ‘We will see you in heaven’.

Paul spoke of the believers in Thessalonica with great affection: ‘Dear to us’ and ‘Cherished’ (2:7, 8), and he thanks God for them. He wanted to see them again but didn’t know when this would be, or even if it would be a meeting in this world. However, he knew he would be together with them ‘in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming’ (2:19). The word translated ‘coming’ is *Parousia.* This Greek word means ‘presence’ or ‘appearing’, and as used here it refers to the second coming of Jesus.

At the end of the first chapter Paul spoke of the Thessalonians ‘waiting for His Son from heaven’ (1:10), and here at the end of chapter 2 he again speaks of Jesus’ *Parousia* or coming (2:19). Such a focus is strange for some Christians today, just as references to Satan are beyond their understanding. Their focus is on the ‘here and now’, on ‘bringing the kingdom of God to earth’ through social action and action on climate change. But Paul’s focus was on the coming of Jesus, the King of the kingdom of God. He was concerned for the poor and needy, especially in the church, but above all was concerned for their salvation, and being ‘together in the presence of the Lord Jesus at his coming’. Let us have the same concern for people in our family, in our church, in our workplace, and in our street. Knowing that loved ones and friends will be in heaven with us is a great comfort; knowing they will not be unless they repent and believe in Jesus is a great concern that leads us to prayer and to witness.

Paul pictures these believers as his ‘crown of rejoicing’, literally ‘boasting’ or ‘glorying’. They were the crown of his ministry. Such was his pride in these believers. The word ‘crown’ referred to the ‘wreath’ given to winners of a race. Paul wanted to finish the race and gain the prize, the crown of righteousness given to ‘all who have loved His appearing’ (2Tim 4:8). These believers were part of Paul’s crown, a ‘feather in his cap’ we might say. Not that he boasted in his own work; he boasted in God who graciously blessed his ministry in terms of these believers, men and women who were pressing on in the faith despite opposition and affliction. Paul is filled with joy and hope even as he glimpses this great day, the day in which all suffering will cease, and all glory and praise will be given to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul pictures these saints as his glory and joy in the presence of the Lord at his coming (2:20). Joy to Paul was seeing more and more people turn from darkness to the light of the gospel. He was not looking to any earthly rewards or to the praise of men, but to heavenly rewards, to hearing the words of Jesus, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’. What reward or praise are you looking for? How often do your think about being in the presence of Jesus when he comes, and think about who will be with you on that day?

As we conclude, remember that not everyone will be found in the presence of Jesus on that day. Look back at the end of the previous section of this letter where Paul reminds us of the wrath to come (2:16). God’s wrath will come upon those persecuting the believers in Thessalonica, but it will also come upon all who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. When you read John 3:16 you should also read John 3:36, where Jesus says of any who do not believe the Son that, ‘the wrath of God remains on him’.