

Faith, Love, Hope. **1 Thessalonians : 1 -10.**

An enormous buzz of excitement gripped the small town.

Exotic strangers had arrived, with their peculiar ways, funny clothes and with an exciting story to tell.

They called a meeting of the Chief Priests and Elders and those in authority and explained to them their wonderful message.

They consulted the Wise Women of that place, who told their friends and neighbours.

It was the talk of the market place, people discussed this wonderful life changing happening over the oranges and grapes, the olive oil and the bread.

As the people realised they had been specially chosen, their joy knew no bounds.

But, warned the new messengers, all would not be straightforward.

There would be wrath, and anger and tears and disappointment, some of the people would even die before their mission would finally be accomplished at some unspecified point in the future.

Yes, Jambusters had come to Bunbury!

When something so exciting, so different so new comes your way, you cannot help but share it. You don't want to keep that special news to yourself. You want everyone to know of your good fortune.

Now supposing instead of the television crew you had been visited by Paul, Silas and Timothy. What would your reaction have been then?

We can't really imagine it, because our time and place are so different from theirs.

But what if we were living in first century Thessalonica, today's Salonica?

Well, what happened when Paul and his companions turned up made that same sort of impression, that buzz of excitement, not only on the people who heard and believed the gospel, but on all sorts of people, all around Greece and the neighbouring countries.

Nobody had to say, "Have you heard about these peculiar Jews who are going about talking about someone called Jesus?" because everybody who had heard was telling someone else.

And this message was truly amazing.

Many scholars believe that this letter to the Thessalonians, written by Paul, is the earliest Christian writing. There were certainly no gospels as we know them, telling of the life and work of Jesus.

So the only way of bringing the gospel, that is the exciting good news about God's enormous love for us all, sending his Son to die so that our sins may be forgiven, and then conquering death by his extraordinary and mysterious resurrection, was to go out into the world and tell it.

And that was Paul's life work.

He, with Silas or Silvanus, and Timothy had all gone to Thessalonica to tell of Jesus. He had gathered up those who were interested into a group known as a church, and so the Church there was born.

They had made a good start, and Paul was pleased with them. But he had other work to do, and so he had to leave them to their own devices. The simplest way to keep in contact was by letter, and we know Paul wrote many more than have survived today.

However, this one to the Thessalonians did, and here is Paul's message.

God, by the Holy Spirit, has given the Thessalonians the gifts of faith, love and hope.

When Paul wrote to the Galatians later on, he gave them a list of gifts of the Spirit, and there he added joy, second only to love.

Paul reminds his readers that this little gathering, the Church, was made by God, it belongs to him, and it exists entirely because of him. And we are chosen today to be his Church. And we exist because of God. We are chosen, all of us.

And just as God chose the Thessalonians to do his joyful and exciting work of faith, love and hope back then, so he is calling us today to do the same. And so that we can, God has given us the tools we need, these gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is faith that enables us to work for God; that plunge in the dark; it is his love for us that keeps us going when things get tough; and in hope we have the courage to overcome and endure.

Faith doesn't mean sitting back and waiting for things to happen. Having faith enables us to work towards an end we cannot see.

In the film world, one little scene is not the whole story, we have faith that the finished result will be so much better and everything will fall into place.

Back in Bunbury, some of the villagers were specially chosen to take part in the film. What a privilege and source of pride and responsibility that brought!

What joy!

Of course, not everybody was chosen who wanted to be, and that caused sadness and disappointment.

But the good news of Jesus is that all of us are chosen to work for him, not just the photogenic, the young, the energetic.

No.

God has a job for each of us.

And this should be a source of pride, of joy, of privilege for us.

I do not often see people here proclaiming that they have a special task to do for Jesus! But we should!

If you were an aspiring actor and your most admired hero or heroine was working in Bunbury right now, you would feel it a great honour to be near them, to watch them work, to make them tea, to fetch and carry, just so that some of their Charisma would rub off.

The sad thing is, that famous person probably isn't very interested in you.

But Jesus is.

His love for *just you alone* is so immense that you can't get your head round it.

Jesus' great commandment to us all was to love one another as he loves us.

And the greatest thing we can do for Jesus is just to love him.

A mutual love.

Jesus loves us, we love him.

That special kind of love when we would do anything for the one we love.

We sometimes do say we love Jesus, but do we mean it? When you love another human being, a partner, a child, you do all you can for them.

Many of us remember Dorothy Vickers.

I'm sure she would be surprised at being mentioned in a sermon, but although she had no children of her own, she showed such love to the children who entered her life.

But Jesus is our very own.

He is family.

God is our loving Father, Jesus our brother, our trusted friend.

If this all sounds too easy, watch out.

Love is hard work, faith is hard work.

These new Christians in Thessalonica were told to wait for Jesus to appear again and take them all up into heaven to his eternal care.

But times of great distress would come first.

In our unequal world, where war, disease, famine, inhumanity caused by our human greed and lust for power; as Tom Wright, former Bishop of Durham puts it, "the only word would be 'wrath' or 'fury', the strange and dark reaction of a loving and holy God to all that distorts and defaces his world."

"We often ask how a loving God can be angry. But in the face of such wickedness as we are living through, this time of wrath will surely come."

But God is a merciful God, slow to chide and swift to bless, as the hymn puts it. He wants his beautiful, perfect world to be put together again, and we are the only ones he has to work for this wonderful day.

And the good news, the gospel message, the hope that we have, is that Jesus himself will deliver his people from all that is evil, all that is devastating, all that causes pain, grief and suffering.

And it is open to all who choose to come to Jesus, to return that wonderful love, that forgiveness we don't deserve and his unending mercy.

This is the hope that expresses itself in endurance, the living out of the future, just as we plant a tree, not for ourselves, but for our grandchildren, confident that it will grow and flourish; in God's love through Christ, we have the confidence that our eternity will grow and flourish.

Surely that's something worth shouting about!

Pat Ellis