

Thursday 14th May 2020

Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonika, in northern Greece, is widely recognised as the earliest of all of the books of the New Testament, having been written around AD 50, barely a generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Unlike the later letters of Paul, which have more of a focus on doctrine, this letter is written in a more personal, energetic style, with Paul offering practical advice. He is most concerned with reassuring what was still a young church and encouraging them to stay faithful. This passage is taken from the end of the letter and the Good News Translation conveys that sense of zeal.

"We beg you, our friends, to pay proper respect to those who work among you, who guide and instruct you in the Christian life. Treat them with the greatest respect and love because of the work they do. Be at peace among yourselves.

We urge you, our friends, to warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one pays back wrong for wrong, but at all times make it your aim to do good to one another and to all people.

Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.

Do not restrain the Holy Spirit; do not despise inspired messages. Put all things to the test: keep what is good and avoid every kind of evil.

May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being—spirit, soul, and body—free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful.

Pray also for us, friends."

1 Thessalonians 5:12-25

These dozen or so sentences are nothing short of a treasury. They are a distillation of everything that it means to live one's life in Christ. There is so much wisdom in so few words, they need to be read and re-read to soak in everything that Paul is saying – and with so much conviction "This is what God wants from you..." (5:18).

The first four sets of instructions elegantly summarise how we are to conduct ourselves in respect of: our leaders (5:12-13); the wider community (5:14-15); our own attitude and outlook (5:16-18); and the spiritual realm (5:19-22).

The message might be straightforward but, as we know from our own experience, it is not easy. Paul does not tell the church to endure its current struggles and wait for a time of rejoicing; instead, "be joyful *always*" (5:16), even in the midst of trial and suffering. Similarly, thanks to God should not be held back until the reward is forthcoming; rather, "be thankful *in all circumstances*" (5:18).

Underpinning all of this, there needs to be constant focus on God "pray *at all times*" (5:17).

How do we do this? By keeping our eyes on the horizon, "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). He has called us and he will ensure that we persevere, even when our own strength fails, "because he is faithful" (5:24).

"...for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." (1 Timothy 1:12)