

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 30th August 2020 – “What is the Church?” (5) – “Built on Faith, love and Hope”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

Well, here we are at the last of this short series of reflections (week 5) on the subject of “*What is the Church?*” That, as we have been reflecting upon in recent weeks, is a question we perhaps thought we knew the answer to. It was, as I suggested at very start of this series, a relatively easy question to answer – the Church was a place, a building where a group of people gathered to worship God and from which mission flowed.

Now that was not, by any means, the wrong answer. To a large extent it is the right answer but, even when could freely access our buildings, we knew it wasn’t the whole answer and that’s been a lesson that has hit home strongly in these recent months.

If lockdown has taught us anything it’s been that there is more to the Church than we imagine. It’s also given us the opportunity to think about what being the church means and it would be a shame to think that, after all these months, that our whole aspiration is to simply get back to the way things were, to turn the clocks back to March 15th 2020 – the last day that we held worship in our own Church buildings.

So, in these recent weeks we’ve been reflecting on the Church being about people... a community rooted in a rich diversity.... a community of worshippers and, as we thought about last week, a people who proclaim and witness to the gospel.

We finish this week by reflecting on the idea that the Church is a community that is built on faith, love and hope.

As we have each week in this series we’ll be guided by a verse taken from Hymn 204 in Church Hymnary 4 – the hymn “*I am the Church*” where the fifth and final verse reads, “*I count if I am ninety, or nine or just a baby. There’s one thing I am sure about and I don’t mean maybe*”

But more of that in a moment, however. Shall we, first of all, pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Lord God, once more you have blessed us leading us through another week, forgiving us for our many mistakes and failings, blessing us in a multitude of ways. And so now we come to worship you.

We come with a sense of joy in our hearts – to pray, to open your word to us, to think and to learn, to give and to receive.

We come to worship you as our creator – our Lord, our Father and as our friend. In coming to worship you we also acknowledge your goodness and the guidance that you have offered each one of us each day, each week, each month and year.

Accept, we pray, our worship as we confess to you the things which hold back our relationship with you.

Forgive us, we pray, for failing to appreciate everything that you have given us, for becoming overfamiliar and unmoved by it all, more concerned with what we don't have rather than with what we do, pre occupied by negative things instead of the richness of what you bring to us.

Forgive us for turning the gospel into something which inhibits and which restricts instead of something which opens up the great possibilities before us.

Teach us this day, as we worship you, to accept life in all its fulness, to celebrate the richness and variety of existence and to share the joy that you have given us in such abundance. So, may we make known the good news to those around us, that they too may understand your goodness and rejoice in your love.

And hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say in the Lord's prayer:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Reflection (part 1)

Before we come to our Bible reading in a few moments (which comes from the 1st Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians) I want to set a bit of background and to do that I want to speak about a man called Jason. You'll find him in Acts chapter 17. He lived in the Greek City of Thessalonica where Paul and his companions, on his second missionary journey, are trying to establish a new Church.

Paul, as we know, carried out three so called "*missionary journeys*" each time reaching farther into Greek and Roman territory, the first of Jesus' followers to take the gospel beyond the border.

When Paul visited a town or city often one of the first places he visited was the local synagogue where he would seek out the people at worship. If there was no synagogue then he would go into the market places and town and village squares where he met the groups gathered there.

Paul had little difficulty finding a group of worshippers in Thessalonica, however, because it had a strong and – as we soon discover – a very loyal Jewish community.

Fearless as ever, Paul starts to speak in the synagogue about Jesus, specifically telling them about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It's a message that impressed and persuaded some of his hearers including this man called Jason, who we'll come back to in a moment. The other hearers in the synagogue, however, were not so impressed and so Paul – with his companion Silas – have to flee for their safety. They have to find a place to hide and so they turn up at Jason's home because they know he has come to faith and that they would be welcomed there.

The rest of the crowd, however, are less than happy and begin roaming the streets looking for Paul and his companions until, eventually, they arrive at Jason's house. The angry mob begin to batter on the front door, they storm his home turning it upside down as they hunt for Paul but, although they know he has been there, they cannot find him.

Somehow, Paul has managed to escape and is, later that night, secretly transported from Thessalonica, by some of the new Christians there, from where he would travel to Berea.

And Jason? What happens to Jason? Well, he is dragged out of his home and forced to pay a bond – some cash – and, we can only assume, told in no uncertain terms to stay quiet!

Thessalonica cannot, therefore, have been an easy place, at that time, to be a Christian which is all the more reason why the arrival of a letter written by Paul himself, must have been such a special thing.

It's opening words, as we will now discover, are a glowing commendation of this incredibly faithful and resilient people who had, in the face of opposition, built their church into a community of faith and love.

Let's pause here, therefore, to hear the first 10 verses of 1st Thessalonians.

Bible Reading – 1st Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 1 to 10

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. 2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection (part 2)

As I mentioned a few moments ago, the sight of a letter written by Paul himself must have brought great excitement to the people of Thessalonica. After all, we can only presume that

their introduction to the life of following Jesus had not been an easy one, especially so if we remember how strong and powerful the reaction of the Jews had been to Paul and Silas' talk of Jesus.

Paul's opening words to the Thessalonians are familiar. It's the way he starts most of his letters – with a word of blessing, the offer of grace and peace to his readers. They are also a reminder that they are a church grafted into, as he puts it at verse 1 “*God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*”.

Those simple opening words that Paul uses here, “*to the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” are perhaps some of the most important that Paul writes here

We've been asking the question in recent weeks about what the Church is, and we've been thinking about the Church as people who worship and proclaim the gospel. And that rightly tells us about some of the activities that the Church is involved in, some of the things that the Church does. But, of course, the Church is not solely defined by its activity.

Or to put it another way – the Church is what it is because *it is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.

The Church may do things – indeed it has to do things – but it only exists because of the fact that it begins its life and is sustained by the very heart of God himself and its relationship with Jesus Christ.

If the Church is not rooted in its faith in *God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ* then it is not, by any definition, the Church. How could it be?

Here's what one writer says about this subject: “*In the context of hairdressing (he writes), if someone's roots are showing, their natural hair colour is resurfacing among the artificial dye; in language, a word's root refers to the part of a word from which others stem; and in gardening, roots are the part of the plant which attach the whole to the ground and carry water and nourishment to the rest of the plant via a system of branches*”

Now it's not for a soon to be 53 year old grey haired man to comment on hair dye...! Anyway, my kids say my hair is more white these days - I just love their honesty! Not!

In any case that's not the sort of root that we are talking about here. The sort of rootedness *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* that Paul is talking about is actually more akin to the gardening image of a plant being rooted into the soil from which it draws its nourishment.

So, when a plant is dug up by its roots and removed from the soil the plant can't possibly grow because it has nothing to nourish it. It is essentially, until its replanted, dead...

What Paul is telling the Church at Thessalonica, therefore, is that they have become rooted deep into the heart of God which means that, as they journey with Jesus, their Church is nourished through their collective faith, through the faith that they share together.

Paul's opening words to the Thessalonians are every bit as significant as anything else he says and they are a powerful reminder to the modern day Church that our existence as a Church is every bit as dependent upon our relationship with God and his Son Jesus Christ as was the life of the Thessalonian Church.

And so, as we go about our work and live out our faith, we ought to be constantly remembering that it is our connection with God himself that is the most important of all. We may do lots of

things – and just as well – but we do them because our faith and rootedness in God enables us and prompts us to do them.

And it is this sense of their connectedness to God that leads Paul to say at verse 2 that he constantly prays for them.

He uses the word “*continually*” here. They are constantly in his mind. After all, the last time he saw them the marauding hordes were winding their way through the streets to Jason’s house in order to capture him and Silas, and it had been poor Jason who had come off the worst.

In the face of adversity they had continued to build themselves up, as he says at verse 3, in their faith and, as I said a moment ago, it has been this faith which has enabled them to build their community.

At verse 3 Paul tells them that their *work has been produced by faith, their labour has been prompted by love and their endurance inspired by their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Of course, Paul has spoken and written about love before, has he not? In some of the Bible’s most outstanding words to be found in 1st Corinthians chapter 13, Paul speaks about the same three words that he mentions to the Church at Thessalonica in our reading today – the words “*Faith, Hope and Love*”.

The faith of the Thessalonians has less to do with all the knowledge that they have acquired but rather by the things which they have done. Paul says that it is their faith that has produced their work.

How does faith make us work? Well surely it has to do with the commitment and inspiration that our faith produces which inspires us to do something about what is important to us.

We used to have picture that we stuck on a kitchen cupboard several years back to encourage our children to help do the washing up more often... It was of a little girl standing at the kitchen sink up to her elbows in fluffy bubbles cleaning a dirty plate. The motto at the top read, “*Chores are easier when you do them for Jesus!*”

Ok – so it’s a bit cheesy but it makes the point, doesn’t it that when we do what is important to us, we often do much better, simply because we are doing what matters to us.

Paul’s next focus is then on the “*labour that is produced by Love*” ... Labour sounds such a harsh word, doesn’t it? Perhaps what Paul means here is what he said at verse 5 of 1st Corinthians chapter 13 that “*Love is not self seeking*”.

In other words, its focus is outwards and away from its source. Their love for each other, as should our love for each other, be something which is outward facing.

As the old song goes, “*They will know we are Christians by our love*”.

And the last word that Paul uses at verse 3 is...? Well, it’s the word – Hope! And hope, as one writer comments, isn’t just some woolly and vague optimism. It’s not the sort of hope that we express when we “*hope that it won’t rain tomorrow (they comment). It means rather what we would imply when we say ‘looking forward to seeing you tomorrow’ knowing that there is already good evidence that we shall not be disappointed*”

And that is where, folks, we have to leave these thoughts into the question “*What is the Church?*” And we didn’t even get past verse 3 of our reading...

Perhaps the message we’ve heard this week is the most important of all these reflections.

Church is not just about what we do. It's about our rootedness in God himself and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's about the Faith, the Love and the Hope that draws us together as a Christian community of God's people who are inspired enough to use the gifts that we have to serve the Lord that we love.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, we rejoice in what it means to be your church even as we have found the very notion of what it means to be church challenged so much in these recent months. We thank you that you have sustained your people throughout these days and given them the rich resources of faith, love and hope to continue building your kingdom.

We pray for those this day who have found these recent months a test of their faith – those who have found some of the challenges and changes overwhelming and who have wondered where, in the midst of it all, that God might be. Reassure them, we pray that you are in the midst of the chances and changes of life, a steady hand at the helm and a calming voice in harder days.

We pray for those who seek to share the love of the gospel in their daily actions – those who tend and care for the needy, mopping a brow or tending to a wound. We pray, as we have often prayed in these recent months, for those working within the health service – doctors, nurses, health care assistants, those who work in administration and in maintaining clean premises – each bringing a sense of care to their work and supporting the most vulnerable.

We also pray for a sense of hope in your world too – a sense of your providence and your care assuring us that the evidence before us and the faith we have leads us to conclude that the promise of tomorrow is for the reliability and dependability of your goodness upon which we can wholly depend.

Father, we thank you that your church is rooted in you and built upon the faith, love and hope of your people. Continue to build your church we pray as we bring these our prayers in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

The God who called us here is sending us out, to turn words into deeds, worship into service, and vision into reality. Together we have celebrated the faith we have. Now let us go to share it.

And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you and all whom you love this day and forevermore, Amen.