**Imitators and examples**  9/7/23

Read: Acts 20:17-38, 1Thessalonians 1

Text: 1Thessalonians 1:6-8

Psalms: 24, 16:7-11, 25:14-22, 117

In the eighteenth century the church in England was marked by the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley. Actually they did not preach in the established church because this church was dead. The whole of society was dead, spiritually dead. The slave trade was flourishing, as was other human trafficking. Child mortality was very high. The rich were getting richer and the poor poorer. One historian describes England as ‘one vast casino’. People found public executions entertaining. Cockfighting and other forms of animal cruelty were rife.

It was into this depravity that Whitefield and Wesley preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. They travelled the country preaching in parks and on street corners, often being heckled and pelted with stones. But they pressed on and the Lord by this word preached and the Holy Spirit brought about a revival, a revival seen in transformed lives and laws- Wilberforce campaigned for a law against slavery. It could be said that England was turned upside by the ministry of Whitefield and Wesley; indeed, some say that civil war was prevented.

When the apostle Paul came to Thessalonica, Roman and Greek society was filled with idol worshippers, and all manner of corruption and immorality. Paul described this society in his first letter the Corinthians 6:9-10, verses quoted in the context of our twenty first century society not so long ago. We might also note the riot in Ephesus, where men making idols got very angry because their business was declining (Acts 19). In Athens many mocked Paul when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead. In Thessalonica they said of Paul and his brothers that they were ‘turning the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6).

Paul had only been in Thessalonica for three weeks and the people, mainly Jews, were rioting. Why were they rioting over a man preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified? Could it have been that the transformed lives of those who believed in Jesus impacted those around them? I know from India that a man who refused to take bribes was hounded out of his workplace. People are being hounded from workplaces in our society if they do not wear the rainbow ribbon of the homosexuals.

The apostle Paul did not promise new believers in Thessalonica a trouble free life of good health and great wealth. He knew from personal experience the cost of following Jesus (2Cor 11:24-28). He knew the cost Jesus himself paid for living a sinless life in this world. Jesus came to turn the world, or at least the lives of those chosen by God to believe in him, right way up. Paul was concerned that these new believers might not survive the opposition and afflictions of the world; which was why he was so glad to get news from Timothy, and wrote this letter of encouragement, ‘To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). He begins the letter giving thanks to God for them (1:2). We continue looking at, and learning from, his prayer as we come to verses 6-8 today.

Paul wrote of their faith, love, and ‘hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’ as he reminded them of their election by God and the power of the Holy Spirit who was given to them when they believed. Paul gives thanks to God that they became imitators of him and of the Lord, that they endured affliction with joy, and went on to be examples to everyone who saw or heard about their transformed hearts and lives.

**1. Imitators of us and of the Lord**

Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying, ‘Imitate me’ (1Cor 11:1), and now he says the same thing to the Thessalonians; from this Greek word we get the word ‘mimic’. Have you ever written to anyone saying, ‘Imitate me’? Do you think it presumptuous to do so? It certainly gives cause to examine your own life. Your children will imitate you anyway, especially in the way you attend worship on the Lord’s Day.

Paul was a man who practiced what he preached. He did so by the grace of God. He did not claim to be perfect; he called himself the chief of sinners, but he was a forgiven chief of sinners (1Tim 1:15). He was living as a new creation in Christ Jesus, meaning he did not live for self but for Christ. He was living a life of love, love for Christ and love for the brethren. People who do not know Christ and his grace live for themselves and for their own glory. Sadly, some who claim to know Christ are still living in their old worldly ways. They do not know what it means to be a new creation in Christ Jesus. But Paul certainly did, and he urged all who believed to follow his example; which those in Thessalonica were doing.

Paul did not make up his own rules for living, unlike cult leaders and so many today, even in the church. Cult leaders invariably fail to follow their own rules anyway! When Paul said, ‘Imitate me’, he went on to say, ‘as I also imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1). Here in this letter to the Thessalonians he says that they ‘became imitators of us and of the Lord’ (1:6). They had seen how Paul lived; he confidently states, ‘You know what kind of men we were among you’ (1:5), even if it was only for a few weeks. Paul himself had seen the life that Jesus lived, even if he rejected Jesus at the time. Moreover, he learnt from the other apostles about the life of Jesus. Jesus lived a completely transparent life; he had no fear of emails or text messages being revealed to the public!

God sent his only begotten and beloved Son into this world to die on the cross bearing our sins. He died in our place and as our representative, and God raised him from the dead on the third day according to the gospel. It is right to focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Saviour, but let us not forget the life that Jesus lived in this fallen world. If Jesus is our Lord as well as Saviour we will imitate him as Paul did, and as these Thessalonians did. It is true that some people focus on the life and teaching of Jesus and neglect the cross, thinking that living a self-sacrificing life like Jesus is the way to be saved. It is foolish to think we can live like Jesus and be saved, but we who are saved by grace through faith do seek to follow or imitate Christ, as Paul did.

Paul must have taught the Thessalonians well about imitating Christ because he was only with them a short time. Christ and his life however, was set before them in the Scriptures. The NT was not yet completed but they could search the Scriptures of the OT, which point to Christ from beginning to end (Luke 24:44). We have the NT as well as the OT, so have no excuse for ignorance regarding the sinless, self-sacrificing life of Christ. I recall leaving behind a new believer in India. She had turned to Christ from idols and suffered persecution in her village, including rocks thrown on her roof. I was worried if she would continue in the faith, but trusted the Lord by his word and Spirit to keep her in the way.

**2. Affliction with joy**

Looking at the life of Jesus, the Son of God, we do not see a life luxury or fame- which confounded people hearing he was a king! Even his own people, the Jews, rejected him (John 1:11). The pagan world did not appreciate a man living a righteous life: ‘Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil’ (John 3:19). In the end, which was after only three years of active ministry, wicked men in their jealously and hatred of righteousness conspired to put Jesus to death.

Jesus told his disciples, ‘If the world hates you, you know that it hated me first’ (John 15:18). Jesus faced opposition and affliction soon after he began his ministry. But he did not stop. Nor did not take to reviling those who attacked him and eventually hung him on the cross. Every day of his life, Jesus was focussed on doing the will of his Father in heaven, not on his own well-being or reputation. The world was not ready for such a person, not then and not today!

In Hebrews 12:2 we are told to look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of our faith, ‘who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’. Do you understand these words- I don’t! How can joy be mentioned in the same sentence as the cross of Jesus? When Hollywood makes a movie about Jesus they highlight the brutality and the suffering, which was real of course, but is not what the Bible highlights, certainly not in this verse in Hebrews: Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame, ‘for the joy that was set before Him’ (Heb 12:2). Jesus looked beyond the affliction of men, beyond the mocking, the shame and the pain, to the Father in heaven, to the joy of being with his Father in heaven.

Paul and his fellow missionaries imitated Christ, and they looked to his return in glory. Before coming to Thessalonica they were in Philippi where they were thrown into prison. Did this break them; did they start blaming God for their suffering? What we see is Paul and Silas praying and praising God from their prison cell, and that at midnight (Acts 16:25). Back in Jerusalem, the apostles actually rejoiced that they had been counted worthy of being beaten for Christ’s sake, of suffering ‘shame for His name’ (Acts 5:41). They had learnt from Jesus how to rejoice in the midst of affliction.

Paul had learnt how to rejoice in his afflictions, and he had lots of them, including a ‘thorn in the flesh’. He learned that God’s grace is sufficient for any and every affliction (2Cor 12:9). The believers in Thessalonica had learned the same thing, or had received the same grace. It was not so much something they learned as someone they received, namely the Holy Spirit; it was ‘joy of the Holy Spirit’ (1:5, 6). The question is, ‘Do you know the joy of the Holy Spirit, joy that continues even during suffering and affliction? If you are a believer you have been given the Holy Spirit. I hope you no longer think that the Christian life should be trouble free, a life of worldly joy and happiness as distinct from the joy of the Holy Spirit!

**3. Examples to all believers**

Paul’s time in Thessalonica was brief, but he had seen some Jews and many Greeks believe and join the church (Acts 17:4). He was forced to leave for the sake of the local church, and heard nothing about these new believers until Timothy visited and brought news back to Paul. Whether from Timothy or from others, Paul heard that the faith of these believers in Thessalonica had become known far and wide, in Macedonia and in Achaia or Greece. It seems that their transformed lives were newsworthy.

When a group of men and women throw out their household idols, and stop living greedy, corrupt, and immoral lives, people notice. There was no political campaign and no new laws passed, just lives transformed by the power of the gospel. This was the way of Jesus, the way of the apostles, and it must be our way in the church today. We can raise our voice against laws promoting sexual immorality or injustice, but only the gospel has the power to transform lives and change society from within.

The gospel came to Thessalonica not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit (1:5). Words are necessary: ‘How shall they hear without a preacher?’ (Rom 10:14). But this word must come in the power of the Holy Spirit if hearts are to be impacted and changed. And it is also true that people must see examples of the gospel changing a life or lives. Paul told those who heard him preach the gospel, ‘Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ’. Now he saw these new believers being examples to many others; in effect saying, ‘Imitate me, as imitate Christ’ (1:7, 8).

Hypocrites in the church are a great stumbling block to people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. They hear the gospel but see something different. Even so, if you are using this excuse for not believing, be sure that in the end this excuse will not wash with God; both you and the hypocrite will be judged. We will all have to give an account of how we lived out the faith given to us by the Lord. Let us focus on being examples to the flock of God, and to outsiders, because people are not just listening to our words; they are watching how we live in this fallen world. Christians living as Christians have impacted society in the past, and will do so today.