

Sermon 1 Thessalonians 1 1 10 19th Sunday after Pentecost Series A

Sermon: 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (v. 3)

Theme: Faith + Love + Hope

Goal: Being a Christian is not just a status, but a constantly ongoing way of life.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: 1st Thessalonians was probably the very first letter written by Paul, the Apostle. Paul was able to stay only for three weeks in the city during his 2nd Missionary Trip, when he reached Greece. It had been a very difficult time for him and for the first converted, since the Jews persecuted him from city to city (Acts 17:1-9).

What can you do in three weeks of evangelization? You can sow the seed but you don't have time to water it and to take care of it. *You can imagine that in three weeks Paul did not have time to get to every subject in depth and to correct all misunderstandings* (Phil Brandt).

Even so, God blessed the preaching of the Gospel and many believed in Christ. So, maybe just some weeks after his departure from Thessalonica, Paul wrote this letter while he was in Corinth, where he stayed for a year and a half (Acts 18:11). He wrote this letter to strengthen the faith of the new converted and to respond to some doubts and questions raised among the believers.

Thessalonica was a very important seaport city (like Cape Town?). It had 200.000 inhabitants and was the capital of the Province of Macedonia. It was an important communication and trade centre, and this helped to spread the Gospel from there to many different directions, as Paul states in our text.

Paul begins this letter praising the Faith, the Love and the Hope of the new Christians of Thessalonica and praying for them. He highlights these three important marks of this church. We can apply

them to St. Thomas as well and do an analyses how these three marks are alive and active among us. The trilogy Faith + Love + Hope is very common in Paul's letters and they are also marks of true conversion and of a true church.

I – Faith

Thessalonica was a polytheist city as all other cities of the Roman Empire. When a Jew was converted to Christianity, this was a continuation of his faith, because he accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and the accomplishment of all the Old Testament promises. But when a pagan was converted to Christ this meant a radical change of his life. The Psalm 96 for today says: “For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.” And Paul confirms the sincerity of faith of the new Christians in Thessalonica when he witnesses what he had heard from others: “They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”

We don't have visible idols and images of gods in our streets and temples anymore, as they used to have them at that time. But everything that is more important for us than God turns into an idol. For some is their job, their money, their family, their leisure... As we were born into Christian families, and we didn't pass through the radical change of worshiping idols to worshiping God, it is easy to slip to these hidden idols, leaving God to a second, third or even fourth rank in our life. Jesus said: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (food, clothes, and whatever more is necessary for this life) will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

The new Christians in Thessalonica lived their faith and shared their faith. Paul reports: “The Lord's message rang out from you not only

in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.” Mission is contagious! I cannot hold Jesus only for myself. My faith in Jesus and the blessing of forgiveness has to be shared! Therefore Paul, Silas and Timothy “always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith...”

II – Love

“...and your labour prompted by love.” George Forell wrote a book entitled “Faith Active in Love”. Faith is never alone, but works through love. The Lutheran Confessions say, quoting Luther: *Faith kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active* (FC SD, IV, 10–11). James 2:17 says: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

The Thessalonians became fast known among other churches for their faith active in love. Paul says about them: “You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit... to serve the living and true God... And so you became a model to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” They had helped Paul, Silas and Timothy in their suffering, and were helping others as well. Love is not just a feeling, and inner ecstasies, but it shows itself in actions of charity, care, kindness, patience, self-control and so on.

III – Hope

The third part of the trilogy is Hope. Paul praises the new Christians

in Thessalonica for their hope saying: “We continually remember...your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Only Jesus by His resurrection can give hope to us. No one but Jesus came back from the dead to tell us about the other side of the grave. Whatever is said by ancient and modern religion and philosophy about life after death is speculation. The resurrection of Christ gives us the assurance that whatever He had said during His ministry about eternal life is true and reliable. He is the firstfruit of the resurrection that we, who believe in Him, shall follow Him to the house of the Father. There is no doubt!

As new Christians, the Thessalonians were not that sure about the situation of the dead, the life everlasting and the second coming of Christ. Paul explains it in clear words in his two letters to the Thessalonians. I encourage you to read both letters; they are short. They will strengthen your faith and your hope, giving you more motivation for love and for mission. If I don't have the right hope, I will be deceived and will not reach eternal life with Jesus and all the saints. *It seems that we are too often tempted to put our hope in the things of this world* (Phil Brandt).

Conclusion: Each of us has a different background, different experiences in our lives, and different ways brought us together at St. Thomas. I like to hear the story of each of you, as many have already shared it with me. But we are all united in the same faith, in the same love, and in the same hope since we were baptized. Our way to this fellowship was guided by the Holy Spirit. By the grace of God we are all firm and united and we need to be encouraged not to reject God's grace in Jesus, but to grow in faith, in love and in hope. Amen.

(Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 19 October 2014)