

Sermon preached on Sunday 18 October 2020

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I Thessalonians 1.1-10

The Psalmist urges us to give up on threadbare songs and to worship God with things fresh off the loom. At Downing Place Church we try all sorts. Nothing threadbare, I hope, but lots that stood the test of time, alongside new things and older material given a different feel, like Morning has broken in Cat Stevens' version.

Of course, we don't always see ourselves as others do. When Paul is writing to the church in Thessalonica — modern day Thessaloniki, Greece; second largest city - he effectively reflects back to them what he sees of them. In this epistle he mentions how they are striving to be a Christian community in a hostile world. He recalls their faith and their love. He highlights how the Gospel came to them both through the spoken word, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, and he tells of how their joy is an example to others. And I note, too, that he sees them as a community committed to God's mission.

I wonder how Downing Place Church would be seen. It is not easy to say, given that we have no place to meet at the moment, due to the building work on the Downing Place premises. And the pandemic has not made church life easy either. Perhaps we should let Paul's understanding of what he recalls of Thessalonica show us things to which we should aspire. After all, the way this letter is written - and it maybe one of the earliest letters of Paul – he starts with the words of thanksgiving that we just heard, and then, later in the letter develops each of those four ideas so that they are not just honouring the Thessalonians for what they have been, but spurs to what they are yet to become.

If you are new to Downing Place Church today, I wonder what you see. Certainly just like those ancient Greeks, we are a Christian community set in times that are not so much hostile as apathetic. How important it is to seize the Coronavirus moment and speak something meaningful to a grey and weary era – 'no sentimental platitude, but ... a song, just off the loom, fresh-woven ... as new as God's eternal now, transcending time and sense.'

As we dream of what God calls us to be as we inhabit our renewed premises, surely we will aspire to be people of faith and love. People of faith that is not about dogma which tells God who God is, but rather faith that is the adventure of journeying with Jesus Christ into discovering God through worship, good works and rich fellowship. And people of love, who trust God's love to be new every morning and allow that love to infect who we are and how we engage with the world. And like those Thessalonians, we do well to aspire to proclaim the Gospel. The Reformed tradition in which we stand believes that God is still speaking – through the Scriptures as the Holy Spirit interprets them to us for our time and place. It's not an old word for a former world, but an innovative word for today, with all the potential and problems that 2020 has.

And then there's mission. The Church's agenda is not about the whims of its members. It's about what its members discern to be God's work in that world of 2020: commitment to the climate, to inclusion that will not tolerate exclusion for whatever reason, and to wellbeing, that seeks the wholeness and healing of all.

I don't know whether that is a mirror of what we are, but I am grateful for this letter to Thessaloniki, with its pointers to what we might be. If we already are, to God be the glory. If we are not, may that same Holy Spirit so arrest us, that we become pliable to all her gifts and fruit, to be the church God calls us to be.