

Sunday 12th June 2022 (Trinity Sunday) – 1 Thessalonians 1 – ‘Faith, hope and love’

I wonder if you know what the first word was that you spoke? Almost certainly you won't remember it, but maybe one of your parents did and told you later. Or perhaps if you've been fortunate enough to be a parent or grandparent, you'll have heard the first word uttered by your child or grandchild. Mums are usually disappointed to find that a baby's first word is 'Dad', but that's because 'dadadada' is a much easier sound to make than 'mumumum'! Urban myth has it that Albert Einstein said nothing at all for four years, and then his first words were a complete sentence. Make of that what you will.

But today we're also likely hearing some famous first words. The lovely little letter of 1 Thessalonians is probably the first book of the New Testament to be written – which means that what you heard just now is the very earliest chapter of what became the New Testament of the bible. In other words, **it's the earliest record we have of what the original church believed and how the church lived**. As such, this makes it enormously important, and it's why I've subtitled this whole series 'how to be church'. Although we also have Luke's vital account of the very first church in the book of Acts – what we have here are likely the first words written by one of its most important leaders.

The fact that we have both a history of the first churches in Acts and the letters that were written to some of them by their leaders is incredibly useful, because it allows us in many cases to see why the letters were written in the first place. This is certainly true for this letter written to the fledgling church in Thessalonica (nowadays known as the city of Thessaloniki in northern Greece). Paul had visited them in Acts chapter 17 and started a church (you can read the account yourself). However, he'd faced significant opposition and had only been able to stay there for three weeks before he was run out of town.

Even in three weeks, however, he'd seen quite a significant number of citizens decide to become followers of Jesus, and he was desperate to know how they were getting on. After Thessalonica, Paul had gone to Berea, where he was also forced to move on and eventually ended up in Athens. From there, we learn in 3:1 of this letter that Paul had sent his friend Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out. Imagine Paul's joy when Timothy brings back a good report – the church is surviving and growing, even though they have faced real persecution. Encouraged by this news, Paul immediately pens a letter back to them to give them further support – and this is the letter which we're reading now.

Just in that brief overview I hope you get a sense of **how real this situation is**. What we're reading here is not a lecture of academic theology given by some professor; it's a heartfelt reaching out from a worried friend to people he loves and misses. Parchment is expensive, so he's only got one sheet to cram as much love and encouragement as he can before he gets another friend to walk the hundred miles or so from Athens to Thessalonica to deliver the letter in secret, where it will be read out the next time the church gathers for a meeting. Imagine Paul scratching his pen on the page by candlelight after a day making tents and sharing the gospel. Imagine Timothy or Silas putting the letter in their bag and hoping not to be recognised by their opponents back in Thessalonica. Imagine the church all huddled together quietly listening to Paul's words.

What we now talk about as ‘the creed’ or ‘theology’ was not fashioned in brainstorming seminars and lecture modules – it was hammered out in the crucible of real life.

So what we do we learn about the very first written expression of what became the Christian faith? First, we see that God is called Father and Jesus is called ‘Lord’ – it’s there in verse 1: ‘God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ This tells us that Jesus’ own teaching on prayer had already sunk deep in these early Christians: they related to God as a loving parent. They also believed that Jesus was divine, giving him the name they usually reserved for God. To all those critics who write nonsense about the church only deciding later that Jesus was divine: less than 20 years after his death, the first generation of church leaders were sure of it. If this letter is indeed the earliest part of the New Testament, then the very first written reference to Jesus is that he is Lord and Christ.

Then at the end of v1 we also get the summary of the Christian message which even now reflects the focus of what we believe: **‘grace and peace’**. When Paul first used this, it was a clever adaptation of a Roman greeting; but it still summarises beautifully the heart of our good news: we are saved by grace, in order that we might have peace – with God first and foremost, but also with others and even ourselves. What we believe now, what we teach now, what we emphasise in our services through things like confession and sharing the peace, are the same as the original church 2,000 years ago. **We are people of grace, and peace.**

What we also see in this first chapter is how the early church came to grow in its understanding of God. Today is Trinity Sunday, a day when we celebrate God as Father, Son and Spirit. This is always a head-scratcher, and we’ll never fathom it completely this side of the grave: but the biggest mistake we make when we think about the Trinity is to treat it as some sort of abstract belief about God. But this is not how what we now call the doctrine of the Trinity came about: understanding that God had three natures was **something the early Christians developed as a practical solution to everything they were learning about God.** Look how God is described in this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians: first we have God the Father, who we learn in verse 4 loves us and has chosen us. He’s also the person we pray to in v3.

Then we have Jesus – who is also God, because he’s described as Lord. This Jesus rescues us in v10, is the pattern of living we follow in v6, is the one who inspires our faith, hope and love in v3, and who is coming again in v10. Finally we have the Holy Spirit, who brings conviction of our hearts to the message, who brings the power of God in our lives in v5, and who gives us unexpected joy in v6.

Can you see what’s going on here? Paul is not formulating ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity’ – he’s describing what a real 3-dimensional faith looks like. In fact, **he’s describing how to live a 3-dimensional life by relating to a 3-dimensional God.** Every part of the Trinity adds something to our relationship with God. If any part was taken away, how much would we lose!

So, as I wrap up today, I just want to encourage us all to remember why we need to worship God as Trinity, as 3-in-1. It’s *not* an abstract concept: a 3-dimensional God gives us a 3-dimensional faith and therefore a 3-dimensional life. Just like this tiny church under pressure who received this original letter, we need God in heaven, in history and in our hearts. And, inspired by this amazing 3-dimensional God, may our faith produce fruitful work, may our love produce energetic labour, and may our hope in Jesus give us grace to hold fast, in every circumstance this week. Amen.