

Sunday 26th June 2022 – 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13 – ‘Overflowing Love’

After two years of pandemic-related restrictions, I know many of you are taking the chance at the moment to catch up with family and friends. Visits that were planned in 2020 or 2021 and have been postponed on numerous occasions are finally happening. There are joyful reunions all over the place – praise God! Not even the current travel chaos can spoil the chance for many of you to see people you’ve been longing to see for months or even years.

For all that technology has minimised the pain of absence, allowing people to see each other on their phones and computers, **there is nothing like a face-to-face visit**, is there? We are relational beings, we are made to be with each other. St Paul knows this as well as anyone: as we’ve seen over the first couple of weeks of our journey in this lovely letter, he’s longing to see the church he founded, the people he has already begun to love. He was forced to leave them, and knows how vulnerable they are.

You can really get a sense of what it felt like for him in today’s passage. Look at the language he uses: v17 ‘when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time, out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.’ Or the first verse of chapter 3: ‘when we could stand it no longer... we sent Timothy.’ And again verse 5: ‘when we could stand it no longer.’

If you’ve felt anguish at not being able to visit your loved ones, then you’ll know what Paul is feeling! He burns with what he calls an ‘intense longing’ to see them again. And Paul’s travel restrictions were even more severe than ours were: to return would put his life in danger, which is why he has to send a friend instead, and then offer what love and support he can with a letter.

One of the great things about this early letter is that, although there is not a huge amount of theology in it, what we see is **vibrant faith worked out at a very human level**. And Paul’s prayer for this small, fragile group of believers is refreshingly simple: v12 *‘May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.’*

Overflowing love. It’s a pretty good way to describe what a healthy Christian life like, isn’t it? Of course the implication is that we ourselves have been filled with love first – enough to overflow out to others. So it starts with ensuring that our love tanks are being topped up: first and foremost by God, as we feed on his love by reading his word, praying to be filled, inviting God’s loving presence into our hearts.

However, we can also assist that process in the ways we relate to each other. ‘Christ has no hands but our hands,’ begins St Teresa’s famous prayer; we can bring the love of God to others – just indeed as St Paul does here. In fact the best illustrations of what Paul means by praying for overflowing love among the Thessalonians is to see how he relates to them. What does Paul’s love for them look like?

First, he is immensely grateful to God for them: v9 ‘How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you.’

Nowadays it's easy, even fashionable, to give the Church a good kicking. And sometimes it deserves it: but I find Paul's gratitude for the Christians he knows inspiring. He never loses a sense of wonder that we have the chance to journey alongside a group of people towards the hope of glory. If you're feeling a bit jaded today with The Church (capital T capital C) or even with a particular Christian, then perhaps take a moment to remind yourselves what we have to be thankful for. God has given us others (all of you!) to journey with us – let's be thankful that we do not follow Jesus alone.

Second, he is proud of them: ch2, vv19-20: 'For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, *you* are our glory and our joy.' This young church has a long way to go: but it doesn't stop Paul cheering them on. Again, I find it both challenging and inspiring how proud Paul is of them, how determined he is to encourage them. Who could you encourage today? Who needs cheering on? Who can you choose to be proud of, and tell them so?

Next, he prays for them. That's really what he's doing with that lovely blessing about their being filled with 'overflowing love' – it's a prayer. He also mentions prayer in v10, as he's done several times already in the first few chapters. It's easy to forget to pray for others. Even vicars can get self-absorbed at times! But supporting each other in prayer is so vital. If you're on either of our confidential church prayer chains you'll know how many emails have been sent over the last few years thanking us for real answers to prayer, real changes to situations. Prayer does make a difference. If you can't support someone in person, do take a moment to pray for them. Why not join our prayer chain, or create a little reminder for yourself just to pray for a few people each day or each week?

Finally he keeps pointing them to the promises of God, towards our present and future hope. It's great to offer people support and love now – but Paul also knows that to keep going we need to keep our eyes on the prize. He is very candid in this passage about the challenges we face following Jesus. So, alongside overflowing love, he also prays for strong hearts and pure lifestyles – all set in the context of the reminder that Jesus is coming again, and will complete the task of bringing us to be with him in glory.

As I draw to a close, it's tempting to turn the idea of overflowing love into something soppy and sentimental. And let's not forget that there is real and deep emotion here, a heart longing. But I take great heart from the fact that it's also intensely practical. It's a set of emotions I can do something with: being thankful for all of you, being proud of you, praying for you and helping us all to keep our eyes on the prize. May God grant all of us grace to keep cheering each other on!

I can't do better than to close by praying the blessing for all of us that Paul prays for the church: ¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.' Amen.