

May only truth be spoken and truth heard. Amen.

Imagine if the diocese existed during a time where there were no phones, or internet, and slow-moving vehicles. Our community would have looked like Paul's. Maybe a couple of times a year, a priest would make it to each of the parishes on the Island for a service and some visiting, but all other pastoral care would have been through writing letters. Having come from a shared ministry spread over hundreds of kilometers, I felt a bit of a kindred spirit with Paul in that he would have been a pastor to several churches, and he would have travelled many miles to visit them.

Paul was a circuit-riding preacher, and his main form of communication was letter writing. Because of the large distances between these communities, Paul didn't have the ability to go back and forth all the time, so he relied greatly on his skill at writing pastoral letters as a way of mentoring his communities. Paul founded many Christian churches and wrote many letters, many of which were chiding communities that he heard were going against what he had taught and trying to set them once again on the right path. So, while it may strike us as odd that what would be considered old pieces of mail from Paul would be important enough that they are included in the scriptures, and that they would be studied and commented upon, it is in these letters that we gain historical and theological insights into the beginning of the Christian movement.

This is especially the case with the letter to the Thessalonians. Scholars believe that this letter was the first of Paul's epistles, which would make these words very old. And since these scholars are quite certain that the writing of the epistles pre-dates the writing down of the Gospels by a good bit of time, 1 Thessalonians is thought to be the earliest document ever written about following the ministry of Jesus Christ. In other words, this may be the first bit of Christian writing and theological reflection ever.

The purpose of the letter is pretty clear. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy had worked in Thessalonica to successfully establish various house churches that were united enough that he addressed his letter to “The Church of the Thessalonians.” It appears that these three men were forced to flee Thessalonica, likely due to local opposition, and very likely before they were ready to leave. Paul's concern for this community is evident in the fact that he sent Timothy back into the den, as it was, to check up on everyone.

What he heard back must have been really good because Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, the opening of which we heard today, is full of praise and thanksgiving. Because Timothy's report was reassuring, Paul transitions from his short greeting immediately to expressions of gratitude for the community. He is especially encouraged by their perseverance despite persecution in the “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.” You will hear this pattern of faith, love, and hope again later in the letter.

One of the most notable features of this section is Paul's emphasis on the power and presence of the living God who has been at work among the Thessalonians. He does not seek to prove that God has acted powerfully in him and the community; he takes it for granted. In fact, the experience of God's powerful presence serves as a key premise upon which Paul writes his thanksgiving and later exhortations. And we should not dismiss this vibrant awareness of the nearness of the living God as an outdated premise. Being aware of God's power and presence in our lives holds rich vitality for our spiritual life.

We will never be able to fully understand the experiences of Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, and the Thessalonian community. But we can remain prayerfully aware of the presence and power of God who is constantly working in and around us. It is this awareness that will allow us to be transformed by the experience of the living God.

On the basis of such experience, Paul writes that the Thessalonians became imitators of him, his colleagues, and of Christ, as well as examples and messengers for others. Now it's not that Paul feels people should copy their lives after him because he thinks he's “all that”. In Paul's ancient Greco-Roman context, imitation of models

was the basis of education and moral formation. In order to learn how to write, form arguments, and live a good life, people would follow the examples of others who modeled how it should be done. Paul bore the responsibility of providing such a model for the communities he founded in the early Christ movement. What Paul was encouraging the Thessalonians to do was to imitate his efforts to serve God in anticipation of the return of the Messiah, which they all thought would happen in their lifetime.

So, what does it mean for us to be aware of the God’s power and presence in our lives? To imitate Paul and the Thessalonian community in imitating their servitude to God? It means to turn, serve, and wait in faith, love, and hope. The Thessalonians turned from idols, served God, and now wait for the return of the Messiah from heaven. Paul’s practical advice is that they are to not wait idly by, that faith and work are not mutually exclusive. He instructs the Thessalonians to continue in their work, specifying even the tangibility of working with their hands, so that need would not exist among the believers, and they would give a good witness to others. They have been transformed by their belief in Christ, but that does not mean that regular life has come to an end. They are still responsible to be faithful in their vocations. For them to continue to grow into their stellar reputation, work needs to be an element right along with faith, hope, and love.

In order for us to be imitators of Paul, we must have a faith that is active and productive, building muscles of faith that requires going out on a limb for Jesus, trusting him when all about us denies the wisdom of that trust. In order for us to be imitators of Paul, we must have a love that labours. The very character of God is love so in imitation of God, we should also be love. Love is a quality that should consume us and we should look to Jesus that this love may grow in us as a gift of God's grace. In order for us to be imitators of Paul, we must have a hope that strengthens. Developing strong hope in the coming of the Messiah gives us the ability to handle anything that life throws at us. Hope is knowing that no matters what happens today, we will have eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

In his very first epistle, Paul wrote a glowing letter to the Thessalonian community that was full of praise and thanksgiving. According to his opening dialogue, he was glad for the work they were doing, for their desire to imitate his servitude to God, and that they were doing so while full of faith, love, and hope. If Paul were writing a letter to the diocese, whether to an individual parish or the ministry as a whole, what do you think he would have to say?

Amen.