

Sermon 'Faith is hard work'
1 Thes 1:1-10; Ex 33:12-23; Ps 99; Mat 22:15-22
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Introduction

The past week here in Egypt has not been good; the bloody Maspero Massacre last Sunday has again underlined that we, the church in Egypt, are a fragile minority. 25 citizens, mostly Christians, were killed, and the authorities have the audacity to portray those victims as the perpetrators, as the criminals. Shameful.

But maybe not surprising. Even the beginnings of church history are a record of many problems and persecution for the church. We are one community, once church, one body of Jesus Christ.

We cannot separate us from those early Christians, just as we cannot separated us from what has happened with our fellow Christians this week.

In the weeks ahead we will study 1 Thessalonians, the first letter that our apostle, St Paul wrote. This letter was written to a small community of Christians in the big city of Thessalonica, and those Christians were also suffering from pressures and persecutions. Their life was not easy. They 'received the word in much affliction', Paul writes in 1 Thes 1:6.

It is remarkable that St Paul in his letter did not spend too much time discussing the actual problems they faced. Instead, he focused mostly on how those Christians could better serve the Lord their God.

We will, in the weeks ahead, carefully listen to the witness of that church in Thessalonica, in order to enjoy our community with them, and to learn from them.

1 Believing community

The church in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica – now called Saloniki, was the result of the mission work of Paul. He came to that city in the year 50 AD, so about 20 years after our Lord had died and was rose from the dead.

The city had a large harbor, and a mostly Greek population but as a cosmopolitan trading hub, it housed Romans, Jews and dozens of other nationalities as well. **In Acts 17:4-9. Read this now.**

The church in Thessalonica had to deal with serious persecutions by the thugs in town, and they were not defended by the authorities.

Paul quickly left the city because of this persecution, but he left Timothy behind to take care of the vey new congregation of believers.

Paul traveled to Corinth and there he was joined, a few months later, by Timothy again. Paul heard from Timothy how the church in Thessalonica was faring and he therefore wrote this letter that we will now study in the weeks ahead.

The letter is addressed to a very young church in a large pagan city. The church was burdened by many afflictions. Many were left not knowing what to do, and many were weak and defenseless. Almost all were in a state of confusion. But how encouraging was their strong faith in Christ! **Read 1 Thes 1:2-3.**

The persecuted young church got a great commendation from the apostle as he speaks of their *work produced by faith, the labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope*. To believe in the Gospel and love God and our neighbors involved tough work - stamina.

We regularly dedicate our offerings to helping some of our churches in Ethiopia build two simple churches. In Gambella, on the Westside of Ethiopia, we have many brand new believers. They are in the same state as this young church in Thessalonica.

And of many of those new believers we can speak similarly positive words: in the midst of many problems, mostly related to poverty, but they show the work of faith, the labor of love, and steadfast hope.

The process of *receiving* the faith for those Thessalonians had not been without the normal means that God uses – the preaching of the Word. Paul also mentions the work of the Holy Spirit.

And the impact of the Word and the Holy Spirit together on those people was that they became fully convinced. So in Paul's preaching all had gone well: he spoke the word, God came

with power of the Spirit, and the Thessalonians became believed.

St Paul recognized this true faith in the young believers, and he immediately concluded that they therefore they must have been chosen by God. **Read 1 Thes 1 :4.** God had handpicked them out of darkness to place them in his light.

We will now not go into the subject of election. But in any case, consider this: "Try to explain election and you may lose your mind. But try to explain it away and you may lose your soul!"

God had chosen them, just as he has chosen us. A comforting and encouraging thought!

This election has a very individual and personal aspect; but it must not lead to individualist Christians, of which we have some many in our western world these days.

In the passage that we have read, we see that faith in God cannot be separated from following his servant Paul. **Read 1 Thes 1:6.** In our service to God, we follow Jesus Christ *and his apostles*. It is impossible to say: "I am a Christian and I believe in God and Jesus, but I do it in my own way. Moses, and Paul, I do not like those; I don't need those." This is an impossible attitude for a Christian.

We believe in God, we follow Jesus Christ; we are empowered by the Holy Spirit *in the midst of the community of Gods people, his church*. The Christian faith is a package deal.

You cannot do cherry picking, but when you accept the Gospel you also embrace God's worldwide community of Christians, and obviously, in the first place, the apostles and all they wrote.

2 Imitators and Example

I like to focus on two aspects in which the church in Thessalonica is a great example for us.

1) A first great example can be read in the verses, **Read 1 Thes 1:6-7:** They became imitators of the Lord and of the apostles (in faith, joy, suffering, perseverance, and hope of eternal life). The word imitator is 'mimic' in Greek. And by being good imitators, as a brand new church they became an example for others as well.

2) The second important aspect I like to underline is that they did not only receive the

Word of the apostles eagerly, as we saw in verse 5 – but they also trumpeted his word in all of Macedonia and Achaia. **Read 1 Thes 1:8.**

This church in Thessalonica was only a few months old, but already it was an example of evangelism and of faith for churches all around. Churches must be examples for other churches. Even new believers can be such examples by being imitators of the Lord and by speaking his Word.

Let us compete in this contest for being examples for others- personally and as a community.

We are all called by God to be such living imitators of Jesus Christ and his apostles. To follow Christ: that is the secret. We must accompany him so closely that we come to live with him as the first Twelve apostles did, so closely that we become identified with him.

Our Lord is then reflected in our behavior as in a mirror. If the mirror is as it ought to be, it will capture our saviors' most lovable face without distorting it or making a caricature of it; and then other people will have an opportunity of admiring him and following him.

3 Content of the faith

These Thessalonian Christians could be such examples, because of the quality of their faith. Paul describes what this Christian faith actual is. **Read 1 Thes 1:9b-10.**

First St Paul describes the process of conversion. It is a turning away from idols and all other evil, and a turning towards God. This is a radical, 180 degrees turnaround. No compromises are possible. No golden calves. No distorted images of God. God demands not less than total allegiance in our heart, our mind, our behavior.

What is the goal of this process of conversion? That we worship God alone, and that we serve Him, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a radical process.

John Calvin (1509-1564), in his commentary *First Epistle to the Thessalonians* wrote about this:

Paul states that the purpose of conversion [...] is that they might serve God. Hence the purpose of the doctrine of the gospel is to *lead us to worship and obey God*. As long as we are the servants of sin, we are free in regard of righteousness, for

we go as our passions lead us, free from any con-
straining yoke. Only the man who has learned to
put himself wholly in subjection to God is truly
converted to Him.

The faith of our fellow brothers and sisters
in Thessalonica was strong, their love was
visible, and they were steadfast.

But some were, I am sure, tempted to give
up. They were human beings like us. The prob-
lems were so great. Why not just live a quiet
life without problems, persecutions? Why
show in public that we believe in Jesus Christ,
in this society where it can lead to so much
trouble? Why not just keep our heads low?

In order to support the young Christians in
their struggle to not let go of the faith of Jesus
Christ, Paul speaks of the *expected return of our
Lord*.

To be a Christian is not only to turn from
idols to God to serve the living and true God,
but it also involves what we read in 1 Thes
1:10, 'to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he
raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us
from the wrath to come.'

Some scholars believe that these verses
about turning from idols to God and awaiting
the return of Jesus formed part of an early
church liturgy. They certainly sound as if they
were used in such a way.

The early church was aware that faith in God
and obedience to Him are what now defines us,
but the expectation of the return of Jesus Christ
was part of the faith.

John Calvin comments in *his First Epistle to
the Thessalonians* on 1 Thes 1:9:

As trust alone in the divine goodness brings us
to serve God, so also it is the expectation of final
redemption alone that keeps us from growing
weary. So let all who would persevere in a life of
holiness give their whole minds to the hope of
Christ's coming.

Unless we learn to look for the coming of
Christ, our hearts will fail us at every moment.
There is so much injustice; so many problems;
so much bloodshed. But he will come to judge
the living and the dead, to bless those who suf-
fered and to avenge them on those who shed
their blood.

- Jesus rose from the dead – so whatever
happens to us, we may expect our own res-
urrection.

- He will return from heaven – our Lord is in
heaven now; if we suffer on earth, we know
He sits on the throne and he will one day
come to our help.

- He delivers us from the wrath of God – we
do not fear God's judgment. Please Lord,
come to make all things new!

Saint Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), in her
book *Way of Perfection* (70.3) wrote about this
coming judgment and why we can be so fear-
less:

It will be a great thing at the hour of death to
know that we are going to be judged by him
whom we have loved above all things. We can
approach this trial with confidence. It will not
be like going into a strange land but into our
own land, for it is the land that belongs to him
whom we love so much and who loves us.

Conclusion

Like the believers in Thessalonica, we are a
small church in a large city. But be encouraged,
you are handpicked by God. He calls us to fol-
low, yes to imitate Jesus Christ and his apostles.

Yes, faith, love and hope may be hard work,
very hard sometimes. To turn from idols and
to serve God may only be done at a high price.
But it is worth it.

Our response to problems in the city should
not be a hiding, or keeping our heads low. Let
us follow the example of our Thessalonian
brothers and sisters and trumpet the word of
God all around – in a sensitive and wise man-
ner obviously. But the best answer in these
days is to stand with our Egyptian brothers and
sisters, and to not hide our own trust in the
Lord Jesus Christ.

And be encouraged; our Lord will come to de-
liver, most surely, to avenge and to reward. He
does not forget the evils done against his chil-
dren; he does not forget your service and love
for him.

**+In the name of the Father and the Son and the
Holy Spirit, Amen**