

“Hope made real in word and deed”

Psalm 25: 1 – 10

1 Thessalonians 3:5–13

The last few verses of today’s reading from Thessalonians is a benediction or blessing – it may excite some of you that I begin this message with this benediction because if you start with a benediction it may mean that the sermon may not be very long – Here it is the blessing.....I’ll read it to you again: Let these words soak into your spirit"*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints*" (vv. 11–13

Paul here offers prayer and blessing to the Thessalonian believers: that God would bring them together soon, that their love for each other and for all people would increase, and that God would strengthen their hearts in holiness. What an encouraging letter that must have been to receive. During my time in ministry I have had all sorts of letters – some very encouraging but one I remember told me I preach love too much – this person wanted to hear more hell fire!!! I didn’t manage to fulfill their desire. – However this letter that Paul sent to the Thessalonian’s would have been very reassuring and uplifting as well as encouraging them in their faith.

Paul was blessing them. You see Offering a blessing brings hope to others. In blessing one another, we partner with God who is always working to bring about the healing of the world.... It is clear that these Thessalonian Christians have been a wonderful source of blessing for Paul because of their faithfulness and their care for him and for those accompanying him in ministry. He offers these words — and this whole letter — as a blessing to them in return. And that’s how blessings work: we offer them in recognition of the gifts we have received, and in the hope of passing these gifts along, that others may flourish.

The act of blessing is hope made real in word and deed. Spoken or written words of trust and healing. We offer blessing in all sorts of ways – maybe offering a hand of support or comfort placed on another, encouragement or a listening ear, a little card of appreciation even a cup of coffee....

Anyone can bless or receive a blessing. Every Sunday, we Christians have the opportunity and joy of extending blessing to others gathered for worship. We offer words, extend hands and hugs of trust and unity. In communion, we pass the grace of bread and wine to one another as we will do today. As a sign of unity, we hold hands at times and sing. We pray and lay hands on each other in the spirit of prayer and healing, protection, and thanksgiving. *We Presbyterians tend to be a little stiff but it is good for us to practice the art of blessing.*

These are not thoughtless ritual's but simple moments, repeated again and again. We practice them in worship regularly preparing us to carry them with us into the rest of our lives lived beyond the walls of the church or worship centre. There is an old hymn that comes to mind while I am writing this sermon (this shows my age but the words are meaningful)– it's a prayer that all of us could pray – *Make me a blessing, make me a blessing, Out of my life may Jesus shine; Make me a blessing, O Saviour, I pray, Make me a blessing to someone today.*

Imagine the Thessalonians receiving this letter, the encouragement and Hope it would have brought them.

We are in the season of Advent, last week we were reminded of the hope we have in Christ and today it is the peace Christ brings. Hope and peace are such an important part of our lives, without hope or when hope is destroyed Proverbs tells us that our lives become challenged – we become sick at heart – peace deserts us.

The theme of our General Assembly this year was **Hope**,... In Dr Rod Wilson's last address he had a picture of Amy Winehouse on the screen as an illustration – here it is – her face without hope, despair in her eyes, she

suicided at the age of 27 – she felt she had nothing to live for even though she was an accomplished, talented singer. Dr Wilson closed with singing unaccompanied “My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, But wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand. and the gathered Assembly joined in. It was a powerful reminder of the Christian hope we carry.

We can keep that hope for ourselves or we can be people who pass on encouragement, hope, peace and blessing, not just to one another but to the wider world.

During Advent we are given that opportunity. The theme of Christian World Services Christmas Appeal is “Give us Hope” – when we give to CWS we give to poor, vulnerable people, food, education and dignity. Young people in South Sudan, refugees who have fled war in Syria, those struggling after earthquakes in Nepal, Dalit families in South India and other struggling peoples. The Tearfund’s appeal this year is entitled “Stand with Her” and this appeal is standing with survivors of trafficking and exploitation. IN other words, these are opportunities for us to bring hope to people not just through our giving, but also through our concern and prayer for the wider world. There is information for you at the back of the hall on the table regarding these opportunities to sow Hope. There is such desperate need and Advent is a time for us to rediscover the hope on which our faith is founded and find ways of sharing new life with others. Giving food, water and safety is a way of connecting our stories with theirs – a means of showing compassion and an act of peace in a world ripped apart by race, war and religion.

Over the years Ron and I have had different people staying with us in our home, some who have never had any security or hope in their lives. Men on home leave from prison fearing their release into the world, a world for them without hope and many never having had the comfort of any sort of peace. We have tried to help them rebuild their lives. To find that solid foundation of hope that only Christ can give. Collin Fitzpatrick came into the office at Leith last Friday and I was excited to hear that he visits some men

who will soon to be released from prison, encouraging and supporting them and I have spoken with others of you who offer blessing to our community in many wonderful ways – how important it is for us to endeavor to sow hope and blessing in the lives of others.

At the beginning of Advent these words from Thessalonians are important for us – on screen

As Christian people we are very blessed, just as Paul prays for and blesses the Thessalonians, building hope in their hearts and lives so we too are part of that prayer of blessing and we can pass that blessing and encouragement on to others.

“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with his saints”

The words we offer and the things we do are so important. It is good for us to ask ourselves – **Are my words and actions agents of Christ’s blessing or are they saying something else?**

So many in this world are without hope, so many lack self worth – we can all become encouragers of one another, building up hope in lives.

Encouragement is a God given gift. It is amazing what blessing and affirming one another can accomplish. Living with my family watching the children grow and develop daily I see the security that encouragement brings to their lives – it is too easy to pull down but here we are encouraged to abound in love for everyone. Paul's letter is addressed to the newly formed Christian community at Thessalonica, He expresses his love for them and his urgent desire that they continue to make progress in living as followers of Jesus Christ. He reminds them of the second coming of Christ which is one of our themes in Advent. How will they prepare?

The message is clear.

It is simply this – by loving one another and by affirming one another in word and action. May we also accept the challenge

I pray an ancient blessing

May the Blessed One open our lips in blessing

For words have the power to create or destroy

May the Blessed One open our hands in blessing

For actions have the power to heal or to wound

May the Blessed One open our hearts in blessing

That the grace poured in by Christ would overflow

To all, in all and through all

As we come to the communion table we remind ourselves afresh of our Lord Jesus Christ's immense sacrifice