

1 Thessalonians 2:1–16, St Paul's patronal festival: 'Character Counts', 29 June 2025

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What might the apostle Paul say to a congregation like this one (in a building that bears his name)? How might he celebrate an annual festival, looking back at what has been, and looking forward to what is yet to come?

I reckon he may have communicated something very similar to the words of First Thessalonians. It's a letter that some are fond of and familiar with. It's a letter that others can easily overlook. By the time a weary *traveller* from Melbourne has stopped at the 7-Eleven in Five Ways, and probably again at Caldermeade, we're lucky if they pull over at McDonalds here on the highway, let alone pulling off into a side street of Bass to discover the local hotel up for sale. Likewise, by the time a weary *reader* has waded through Romans and two letters to the Corinthians, and several more like Ephesians and Philippians ... we can be tired of Paul's letters and ready to move on.

So we rob ourselves of some exciting local insights if we don't meander into this less-familiar tourist attraction and see why Paul and his friends write two letters to this fledgling church.

Paul's journeys cover the north-east quadrant of the Mediterranean Sea. Over a couple of decades, and travelling in an ever-wider arc with various return loops, he eventually covers the territory from Jerusalem to Rome [Acts 13–28; Romans 15:19].

If we zoom into the region around the Aegean Sea, we see some of his key churches in more detail. And it's within this region that we find the city of Thessalonica. The city was quite influential, being the regional capital, perhaps nearly the size that Geelong is today. Anyone passing through the region would definitely stop by and engage the city, its population and its culture.

Paul and his travelling companions, Silas and Timothy, did just that. They founded a small church but, within the next few weeks or months, they were hounded out of town [Acts 17:1–10]. And so now, licking their wounds in Athens, they take the time to write a letter to see how their fledgling church is faring.

Today we are, of course, looking at only a small sliver of the letter. If you've got a Bible open, glance back at the first chapter of First Thessalonians. Our apostles recount the church's initial conversion. Verse 6: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." And verse 7: "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (the whole left-hand coast of the Aegean Sea, basically modern Greece).

Imagine what a delight it must be if your church leaders can say this about you! Even when I'm not preaching, I regularly visit other churches, and it's fabulous to be able to boast about them when I run into other people: "Look at what God's doing among this particular congregation!"

Indeed, the remaining verses in chapter 1 spell out that the Thessalonians' reputation has become widely known. That's certainly true among the surrounding churches. And we might even wonder if it's a reputation that's spread among unbelievers as well. Wouldn't it be fabulous if the reputation of the Anglican church in Bass, and the wider parish to which it belongs, and the whole diocese of which it's a part were known and boasted of by the community around.

If you want to know more about what the apostles praise in this smaller and fragile church, you can keep reading the whole letter. One thing that's regularly praised is the *character* of the church members. They hold onto faith and love and hope, and these aren't just cerebral virtues that look good on a spiritual checklist. These virtues yield fruit in the wider community: faith and love and hope lead to works and labours and endurance [1:3]. Character counts. The church loves and serves those within it, and we catch glimpses of them loving and serving those who are outside the church community as well. And the church waits patiently for the risen Jesus to return from heaven [1:10]. Character counts.

And, as we move into today's reading from chapter 2, Paul and Silas and Timothy ramp up the stakes. It's not just church members for whom character counts; it's just as important for church leaders. Consistent character counts in ministry.

When Rector Ruth was appointed to this parish last year, I'm sure the church considered her character. Her replacement in Tasmania was staying with me around Easter, and I trust that his appointment (to Ruth's former parish) included a careful check of *his* character as well. When Bishop Richard was selected seven years ago, or when then the Melbourne diocese has just elected a new archbishop, we're alert to the fact that character counts.

Let's skim through some of the elements of character that the apostles praise here in chapter 2. I recognise that I'm walking a delicate tightrope here. These are the character elements expected of church-planting *apostles* in the *first* century. So we cannot automatically assume that they apply to rectors and bishops today. And yet I do want to suggest that you're within your rights to uphold these standards as part of what you're looking for in every leadership role.

In verse 2, we overhear a summary of how the church in Thessalonica was originally planted: "We [apostles] had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition." And the following verses [2:2–7] spell out the purity of the church-planters' motives: "the appeal we make doesn't spring from error or impure motives"; "we're not trying to trick you"; "no, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel"; "we're not trying to please people but God"; "we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed"; again, "we were not looking for praise from people, not from you [Thessalonians] or anyone else"; "no, we were like young children among you"!

Now, it might sound like I've suddenly jumped the rails and started preaching to a leaders' gathering or at the commissioning of a parish council or to a clergy conference. Yes, there are some great insights here for those who plant a church or lead a church (or serve on various ministry rosters). But most of us are regular parishioners who don't carry much in the way of such roles. That's true, too, of the original Thessalonian readers. They weren't planting a church, either. None of them is singled out as having a specific local ministry role. So why have Paul and Silas and Timothy taken more than 20% of their letter to boast about their own ministry?! Indeed, isn't that kind of at odds with the focus we've heard so far? They've been boasting about serving God and how they're *not* concerned with human praises! Something doesn't feel right here – when they're making this boast to the Thessalonians about *not* promoting themselves!

This discomfort invites us to look at the Bible passage just a little more closely. When we look a little more closely, we get a better idea of why our apostles have written this way. Sharp readers might have noticed that I've not yet given much attention to the *first* verse of today's chapter: "You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results." Paul and Silas and Timothy are inviting the Thessalonians to remember their conversions: "you Thessalonians know that God worked through us"; "yes, look at how we approached our ministry: we weren't doing it in any underhanded way; we weren't doing it for any selfish gain; we weren't snake-oil salesmen, laying it on thick to turn a quick buck." (Such self-seeking charlatans were just as common in the first century as they are today.) "No, we were genuine servants of God and, because you know that we were genuine, you can remain confident in our *message*." [my paraphrasing]

Later in the letter, the congregation is directly instructed to think about those who currently look after them [5:12–13]. We find the same instruction in other parts of the Bible [esp. Hebrews 13:7]. So already we might pause, and reflect on the characters of those who've brought us to understand Jesus. I think of a faithful Sunday-school teacher, who taught me for more years than he deserved, and who patiently tolerated any number of unwarranted and annoying questions. I thank God for a variety of careful pastors, who've nudged me gently in my Christian walk, guiding me towards something of Christian maturity.

And that's how our apostles paint themselves in the next paragraph of this morning's passage [1 Thessalonians 2:7–12]: "Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you"; "we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our [very] lives as well"; "we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you" (that is, they earned their own way, rather than being misunderstood as in it for the money); "you are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you". And, just as a few moments ago they described themselves as tender, nursing *mothers*, so now they continue with the parenting image: "we dealt with each of you as a *father* deals with his own children". So that we don't have to guess what merits they see in a first-century father, they spell out the highlights for us: "encouraging ... comforting ... and urging you to live lives worthy of God."

This is why the apostles boast: not, somehow, to undermine or over-promote their *own* words and self-worth, but to bolster the *Thessalonians'* confidence in the gospel message that the apostles brought with them.

How is your gospel confidence this morning?

Have you had a good run of church leaders, who've taught you to trust the gospel of the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath? [1:9–10]

Are you enduring in your Christian walk, even when it can bring suffering and disdain from some parts of society around us? [e.g. 1:6]

We know that we're reading our passage correctly. It's not especially about church *leadership* (although it certainly includes some useful insights, if you have any responsibilities). It's much more about how we respond to the *message* that such church leaders bring.

And we know that we're reading our passage correctly, because that's very much where the last paragraph this morning heads [2:13–16]. We read how the apostles continue to thank God for the Thessalonians and their *response* to the gospel. Basically the first *three chapters* of this letter are a series of thanksgivings, and this last paragraph draws together several of the threads we've considered. "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a *human* word, but as it actually is, the word of *God*."

And the Thessalonians haven't just "believed" this word, as if it's some kind of cerebral factoid to study up and tick off on a multiple-choice test. No, this gospel message has changed their lives! They've started to live differently, and even when the society around them doesn't agree. Back in the first chapter, the Thessalonians were praised for imitating the apostles and even for imitating the Lord Jesus himself, because they trusted in God even when it wasn't fashionable [1:6]. And now in chapter 2, verse 14 continues the same way: "For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from *your own* [Greek] people the same things" that those Judean churches suffered from *their* people.

Here is a church, one which might be smaller and of little worldly consequence, but which is praised for its gospel faithfulness, and for its persistent hope, and for its faithful works. Their faith, love and hope are visible to the apostles and to the surrounding churches, because they're resulting in a changed lifestyle: loving care for one another, and patient waiting and encouraging of each other, even as they wait for Jesus to return.

I hope that the apostle Paul might have seen and said very much the same things to a congregation like this one (in a building that bears his name). I hope that church leaders in the line of Paul and Silas and Timothy might see your faith and love and hope. I hope that they might see the outworkings of these virtues, as you lovingly care for one another (as we've already sung this morning) and patiently wait and encourage each other until Jesus returns. I hope that you would continue to trust and to emulate those good role-models you've had in your Christian walk, that you might continue the journey until Jesus returns or God calls us each home.

May the words of this letter be both a guide and an encouragement to us, to the glory of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.