

## Sermon for the online service, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2022

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

All Bible quotations are NRSV

Last week in the online service, I talked about the opening chapter of 1 Thessalonians. Two groups of three words struck me as I read those verses: faith, love, and hope; turn, serve and wait. It seems to me that you can put these together, so that they become: to turn to faith, to serve with love, and to wait in hope. As I have been thinking about today's reading over the last week, those phrases have still been on my mind, and I think they are relevant today as well. This is not least because I feel that they remind us that Paul is not the stern figure we – and I have certainly been guilty of this - may imagine him to be.

But the verse that really leaps out at me from what we have just heard read today is part of 2:4, where we are told that Paul and his companions Silvanus and Timothy “speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.” That is something which sounds both wonderful and frightening, perhaps indeed rather more the latter.

What does it mean, that God tests our hearts? We're not helped by the variety of ways this phrase has been translated into English. Many translations say test or examine (the original Greek seems to be along these lines), but others opt for the idea of God knowing us through and through, or knowing or testing our motives, or even approving our hearts. The latter makes me think of us passing a test, getting a certificate and being accepted to carry out our calling, as if we have been validated by God. But yet, pass or fail, God loves us anyway.

If we think that being tested by God means that he looks into our hearts and sees who we are truly are, well, that is terrifying isn't it? In Luke, Jesus talks to the disciples about this in a way that feels very disconcerting: “Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops” (12:2-3). But testing our hearts highlights how God does not care about the superficial, but about what matters. In 1 Samuel, the prophet is put in his place when he meets David's brothers, and just from seeing Eliab, who seems to have been tall and handsome, thinks that he must be the future king. God has to remind Samuel that “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:6-7). And that

is what is described here in 1 Thessalonians. God is not distracted by how we appear to others, because he knows what we are really like. And that is something wonderful – frightening yes, to have God knowing our innermost thoughts, but wonderful all the same.

What would God find – what does God find- when he looks into our hearts? It's a very difficult and disconcerting question to answer. I think he might be looking for that famous trio of faith, love and hope, and what we are prepared to do with them. And there are some days when I think that might be ok and I could pass a test; and then others when I think it would be a disaster! And I would never be wholly confident about it. I suppose the fundamental question is whether when God tests our hearts he sees that, although we are not perfect, we can still lead lives worthy of him, as Paul pleads with the Thessalonians to do (2:11). Do we have faith, love and hope? Will we turn to him, serve him, wait for him? Can we try, try and try again?

Well, God knows us completely, as Psalm 139 reminds us so beautifully: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away" (139:1-2). There is no hiding place from God, as indeed Paul had discovered for himself on the road to Damascus. No matter how unsettling that thought may be, it is also awe-inspiring, awesome in the true sense of the word. It may feel as if with God knowing all our thoughts, and living constantly in the presence of God could be understood as suffocating. However, I believe that, in complete contrast, it is in fact liberating. In God, and in Jesus, and in the Spirit, we have someone who knows not just the best of us – what we most want to show the outside world – but who also knows the worst of us – those things we would like to bury as deep as we can. But we are loved and cherished by God no matter what; he will always care for us, despite our flaws and mistakes. He does not turn away from us, and he never will. One way of putting it could be that God keeps faith in us, despite everything we do which suggests that that isn't necessarily a great idea, and despite the fact that we do not always turn in faith to him. It's God's faithfulness, Christ's faithfulness, given without expectation, which is key.

And as God knows us completely, he knows what we can endure, and what we are capable of doing if we believe in him. He knows what we are called to do, how we are called to serve him, even while we are waiting, expectantly and hopefully, to find out what that is. Therefore, he knows what support we need whatever we are meant to do and whatever the situation we face. He is

with us when we suffer, understanding how we feel as he suffered too through Christ. If we need encouragement, he will provide it, perhaps from the Holy Spirit who gave the apostles the prod they needed to get out among the people at Pentecost. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy had also needed courage and endurance on their way to Thessalonica, and that was what they received. As this suggests, however, if we are to live lives worthy of God, it's not going to be just through our own efforts but through his grace and love, which in turn help us to serve him and others with love.

I think God's intimate knowledge of us is also a source of solidarity between us. None of us is perfect, and we all mess things up, no matter how much we may try to pretend that doesn't happen. God knows that about everyone, and yet he loves us all the same; we are united as his people through his love. This is because of his grace which makes him the only genuinely impartial judge there is. He is merciful in a way that people simply aren't. Yes, he will see all that we do, whether it be good or bad, but he will view us through the light of his grace, not as we view things, because he looks for who we are truly are and hence who we can be. He sees the good in all of us which we may overlook.

In looking at this verse, and thinking about God testing our hearts, I keep coming back to that list of qualities or virtues used so often by Paul, namely faith, love and hope. God knows us inside and out; there is nowhere that we can hide from him. But no matter what he loves us and grants us his grace; he continues to be faithful to us. This gives us true freedom, just as it did for Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, and for the people who turned to God in Thessalonica. The freedom we get empowers us to turn to God in faith, to serve him – and others – in love, and to wait in hope for our calling, our role in God's kingdom, to be shown to us.

Eliza Wheaton

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