

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Boom!

Christ Church Liverpool

Theme: The Thessalonians faith, hope and love, demonstrated by radically altered lives, prove the genuineness of their conversion and make Paul praise God.

Aim: Rejoice without pride in the faith, hope and love you see in your life as a sign of your genuine Christian conversion.

One similarity between first century Thessalonica and Liverpool in the Summer of 2011 is that they too had a riot; indeed one that spread from city to city along the coast, though rather slower in the absence of Facebook and, one imagines, the Roman soldiers were rather less restrained in dealing with it than the British police!

No doubt each of us who has given the issue any thought has our own view about the causes of the riots. Acres of newsprint have been produced and millions of hours of blogging have been done analysing the issues with everything from the abolition of Education Maintenance Allowance to police racism to the greed of the bankers to absent fathers getting part of the blame.

Now I don't know about you but I didn't hear any reports of Christian believers being involved in the riots. I guess it's possible that there were some involved and we just never heard about it. But, given the media's delight in exposing anything they see as Christian hypocrisy it seems unlikely the church involvement of young rioters would have escaped mention. So, given that it seems Christian people were at least, less likely than average to be involved in setting fire to Miss Selfridge and stealing LCD TVs from Currys, what does that tell us? What does it tell us about the rioters? What does it tell us about Christians?

Now of course there were many other young people – Muslims, atheists and followers of Jedi – who also didn't go out rioting. So it's tempting for Christian people to draw the conclusion that the reason we didn't riot is the same as the reason those people didn't riot - because we are somehow morally superior.

It's tempting to believe that in certain types of people there is a stronger moral backbone that enables us to avoid going out and smashing up our own, or somebody else's, community. We might think the group of "problem people" who are so morally deviant that they are happy to deprive an 85 year old hairdresser of his living by smashing up his shop is quite small (as Tony Blair suggested in a recent article) or we might, like David Cameron, expand the

categories of people affected by this moral collapse to large swathes of the nation.

It's tempting to believe that Christianity is just the best version of this moral backbone, which is offered by a number of religions and philosophies, and that there is something good about us that means we are not prone to such antisocial behaviour. Christians know the difference between right and wrong. We have had revealed to us in God's word, the Bible, a clear set of moral standards that we are to follow and we have the strength of character to be obedient. I am not like the rioters because I am a good person.

Well I want to suggest to you this morning that the reason Christians didn't go out rioting, in fact the reason genuine Christians reject and turn away from all sorts of sins, is both much more profound and much more disturbing than that we are "good people."

Because in 1 Thessalonians 1 we discover that the thing that makes Christians different is not a better moral character but a gift of God in Christ. In this chapter we see that not going out rioting, among other things, is not a pointer to your impressiveness as a person but to the truthfulness of the message about Jesus Christ. In this chapter we see that the Beatles were wrong and that love is not all you need; we need, v3 of our passage, love, faith and hope and that it's the possession of this trinity of gifts that both transforms our lives and demonstrates that Christianity is the real deal.

But before we come to that, let's just reflect for a minute on what difference faith, hope and love make to the problems in our world...

1 Boom! The world without faith, hope and love is explosive.

It seems to me that the best analysis of the issues that led to our city centres being smashed up last month is that the people responsible, both those who instigated them and those who just got caught up in the moment lack three things: They lack trust in a creator who watches over them in blessing, they lack commitment to a community of people who sacrifice themselves for one another and they lack confidence in a purpose to history that will see justice restored. People do not have faith, they do not have love and they are without hope.

Why did people who would never normally dream of walking into John Lewis and shoplifting or burgling their neighbours house take big TVs from shops? Because if you don't belong to a community where others will give themselves for you then the logical thing to do is whatever you can get away with.

Where have people learned that lesson? From the whole of our society and culture. Because a lack of faith, hope and isn't just confined to a few thousand rioters. It's part of the philosophy of millions of people who have condemned the rioters including many police officers and politicians and journalists. The truth is that these young people haven't failed to understand the values of our culture – they understand them all too well. They believe our culture's creed that it's the survival of the fittest that brought us into existence not the powerful words of a loving Father God. They know hardly anyone in our society has confidence that there is a day of judgment when wrongs will be put right. They see from the way we honour the skyscrapers of the City of London as the people of Babel worshipped their tower that our culture thinks greed is good even when it exploits others.

A lack of faith, hope and love, or perhaps more accurately being told that you have to have faith in yourself, make your own future and love yourself, is the creed of the 21st century west. But such a world, one without faith, hope and love is explosive.

A lack of love leads the directors of Britain's hundred biggest companies to believe that it's perfectly normal to earn 200 times what their employees get and have 30% an average pay rise in a year of recession. A lack of hope leads people to think it's morally fine to steal a TV as long as you cover your face from the CCTV. A lack of faith leads employees to imagine they have to lie or sleep their way to the top.

A society without faith, hope and love, or with faith in, love of, and hope for the wrong things is always going to be a tinder box of seething jealousies, inequalities and resentments where the only lid kept on our selfishness is apathy or fear of punishment.

That was the kind of society, for all its religion, that the Thessalonians Christians lived in. It is exactly the kind of society, for all its supposed progress and sophistication, that we live in too.

But Christians are different. Not because we are better or cleverer than anybody else but because God is spectacularly at work. Let's find out how...

2 Boom! Christians, who have faith, hope and love, are sorted.

Now that heading could sound really arrogant; to see why it isn't we'll need to follow Paul's train of thought quite carefully.

Let's start in v2 where Paul says that he and his friends Silas and Timothy are always thanking God for the Thessalonians.

In his prayers, Paul says, he remembers particularly from the time when he was in Thessalonica their work, labour and endurance for Jesus which he attributes to their faith, hope and love.

The reason Paul thanks God so much for this group of people, none of whom he knew for much more than a fortnight before he was forced out of Thessalonica (you can read all about that in Acts chapter 17 if you like), is that he knows that God loves them and that God, v4, has chosen them.

But hang on a minute. Isn't this supposed to be an explanation of why my "Christians are sorted" heading ISN'T arrogant? But now it seems like we're saying that of all the people who, v5, heard Paul's message about Jesus Christ during those three weeks in Thessalonica, some were "chosen by God." And that sound like they are REALLY up themselves?

Well it's certainly true that Paul is saying that only some of the people who heard him preach about the rescue offered by Jesus through his death believed it.

And it's certainly true that Paul is saying that it was this response of belief that has transformed those people's lives so that they now have faith in something true, love for and from God and hope for eternity.

Paul is saying that it is God's special, electing (to use the technical term) love for the Thessalonian Christians that makes them sorted.

But, if we understand it rightly, that will not make us think the Thessalonian Christians were arrogant, and it will not lead any right-thinking Christian today to arrogance.

Firstly because, as we'll see in a minute, Paul's agenda is not that churches of Christians loved by God should be exclusive clubs keeping others out; rather they should be constantly calling, persuading and encouraging anybody a all who wants to, to join in and be loved by God too.

But secondly because the whole point Paul is making here is that this massive transformation, this "sorting" of the Christians in Thessalonica, was nothing to do with them. They do not have faith, hope and love because they are morally superior people. They have not received the good news about Jesus, the gospel, because they were the ones with the language and literature skills to see the deep and profound truths in the message.

They are sorted, they have been given these incalculably precious gifts of faith in Christ, love for God and people and hope for the future, simply because God wanted to give those things.

In v5 of the passage it does not say that the people in the Thessalonian church are Christian believers because the gospel came to them with careful study, with disciplined thought and with insightful questions and discussion. The sign of their spiritual life was not the quality of their theological discussion of the fact that they were the richest, poorest, cleverest, most spiritual, best or worst people in Thessalonica. The reason for God's choice was nothing to do with them at all.

The thing that sorted them, the thing that has sorted you if you are a Christian here today was simply the grace of God. It is a work of God that makes the message about Jesus be more than just an idea. There are lots of people for whom the birth of Jesus, his teaching, his death and even his miracles and a resurrection are a great idea. For whom they are even historical truth. But for Christians, for those chosen by God in his sovereign love, those words are powerful, spiritual, convicting words.

If you are here today and you are not yet a Christian believer that's great – you are so welcome. Our church meetings are for everyone and everyone here should always feel welcome to invite anyone at all on any Sunday.

But if you are here this morning and you are looking for love. If you are here this morning hoping to find faith. If you feel like you desperately need hope, I want you to know that you won't get those things simply by understanding the words of the sermon or merely by believing that Christianity is true. You need God to act in your life to bring those words to you with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. That will include the belief that Christianity is true, but it will also be much more than that.

Because for Christians, as opposed to merely religious people, the gospel of Jesus isn't just something we affirm. It's a message that works on us, a message that challenges, rebukes and changes people from the inside out. It's a message with power.

It's a message that doesn't just bring answers to deep philosophical questions but actually creates faith, love and hope.

Paul is excited because he sees these things in the Thessalonian church. He is thrilled because they are the sign that God is at work amongst these very ordinary people.

They are, as we will see over future weeks, by no means perfect people. They still have a long way to go in the lifelong school of following Jesus Christ through death into eternal life.

But the key event has happened. The good news of Jesus, Paul's gospel, has come to them with power and created in them faith in Jesus Christ, love for God, his people and all people, and hope for the future. Boom.

And that's not the end of the story. Because something else has happened that not only provides more confirmation for Paul of the genuineness of the Thessalonians transformation under God's hand but which is also enabling other people to experience the same blessings...

3 Boom! Churches of Christians are noisy.

One of the things I've noticed going round lots of different churches over the last few months is that there is a huge variation in the volume at which

church services happen. In some places the dominant sound is reverent silence, perhaps with a single low voice reciting the liturgy. In other places the sound system would be big enough for the V festival and they want to use every amp of it.

Those of you who tend to prefer whispering to wailing will be pleased to know this heading isn't advocating cranking up the new keyboard. Personally I think we're nicely in the middle of the volume range, but perhaps I'm biased.

The kind of noise that Paul talks about the Thessalonian church making didn't come from the music group. It came from each and every member of the congregation. The Thessalonian church made a noise about being Christians. Not a political, start a picket line, write angry letters to your MP, condemn gay people, have a go at single mothers, Daily Express kind of noise

No this was a much more harmonious note. The Thessalonian Christians rang out by joyfully following Christ, v6, "in spite of severe suffering." The fact that they had radically different lives full of faith, hope and love, was broadcast to towns and cities all over the area whenever any of them visited other places. We know of at least three different Christians from Thessalonica who pop up in other cities later in the New Testament. No doubt there were many more who got on with talking about Jesus and loving other people in their workplaces and schools and families and at the university.

Certainly there was so much activity from them that Paul found that when he and his companions came to other towns and cities they, v8, didn't need to say anything about Jesus, because the people already knew about him from the Thessalonian Christians.

Christian churches are noisy places; because Christian people who have received grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ talk about that and demonstrate the effect it has on their lives wherever they go.

Perhaps, this morning, you feel like you're a bit of a failure in that department. Maybe you are hearing this section of the talk and feeling like you'd prefer to switch off because the bit about evangelism is always depressing and the preacher always ends up telling you to do more and you resolve, with a mixture of guilt and bitterness, that you will.

Well don't worry. I'm sure there were lots of Christians in Thessalonica who felt like that too. This is a messed up world and Christians are messed up people; there are always opportunities we don't take or that we foul up. I think we probably try and do too much evangelism on our own rather than really working as a church at doing things together with people who aren't Christians.

But Paul's aim in this letter is to encourage Christians; and that's my aim this morning too. Those of my non-Christian friends and family who know some of you

are quite clear that you are Christians. They know that means you have faith, love and hope that they do not have. My non-Christians friends tell me frequently that there is something about you guys that they do not see in other communities of people they have contact with. The Lord's message is ringing out from you.

As I have visited other churches, around Merseyside and also in places further away where people who used to be part of our church have moved to for work, people know that there is a church here in Liverpool city centre with people chosen by God in it.

There is no credit for us in that. It doesn't make us morally superior. The transformation in our lives brought about by the gospel, this transformation that other people recognise, is God's work from beginning to end and so the glory goes to him.

There is no credit for us. But there is comfort for us.

The glory goes to God. But this morning we can have the assurance that the good news about Jesus is real. We can be confident in the truth of the gospel because not only we, but others too recognise the life-giving, life-changing power of his message.

I don't know whether the Thessalonian Christian's evangelism was more or less effective than ours. I don't know how many people came to faith in that city. I am no apostle Paul. But I do know, from seeing the radical and real changes in many of you over the months and years that you are really Christians. I know that God has chosen you because, when I inadequately preach to you week by week about the grace and love of Christ who died to free you from sin, the words seem come to you with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

The glory for that belongs to God who loves us. But because our church is noisy we can be comforted that what we have believed is a true message with true spiritual power. And the noisier we are about Christ the more assured and comforted about the truth and power of his message we will be.

That really matters, because, as you may have noticed, the passage ends with a fourth and final boom; the boom of the final judgment.

4 Boom! Are you ready for the coming wrath?

The worst thing about a lack of faith hope and love, the worst thing about not having responded to the good news of Jesus by submitting to his authority and being sorry for your wrongdoing, isn't that you might smash up a Tesco. It isn't that you might become an MP who fiddles their expenses or a greedy company director or an arrogant surgeon or live a sexually immoral life. The worst thing about not having received grace and peace from God by responding to Jesus Christ is that there is, v10, a coming wrath, a day of judgment.

It is only Jesus Christ who will be able to rescue us on that day. So it is only those who, like the Thessalonians, have received the message about Jesus with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction who will be rescued.

The question, therefore, this morning is, are you ready?

Paul was confident that the Thessalonian church was ready. He believed that they were believers in Jesus.

There was plenty of evidence for that; Paul summarises it here in three words:

Firstly they had **turned**; they had rejected the idols of their culture in a way we will see in future weeks was very costly for them.

Secondly they were now **servicing** the living and true God, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, both in the church family and by sharing and showing his love and grace in their city.

Thirdly they were **waiting**; anticipating the day when justice would be done and wrongs would be righted.

This morning if there is no sign in your life that you have rejected the values of our culture and turned from its idols. If there is no evidence that your life is given to serving God rather than yourself. And if you are preoccupied only with planning for the future rather than with waiting for THE future then perhaps you need to ask yourself whether you are ready for the coming wrath?

Because if you have not turned, if you are not serving and waiting, then you are not a follower of Jesus and you will not be rescued from judgment.

PAUSE

But I want to finish on a positive note. Because as much as Paul's letter is a warning that should make us examine our hearts it is, overall, an encouragement. I am as convinced this morning of the genuineness of the faith, hope and love of our church as Paul was of the reality of the Thessalonians Christianity.

The vast majority of you here this morning need to know that your church leaders thank God for your work produced by faith, your labour promoted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. We know that God has chosen you.

Brothers and sisters this morning please do rejoice without pride in the faith, hope and love you see in your life as a sign of your genuine Christian conversion.

And may we be more and more assured the noisier we are.

4th September 2011
