

Today we conclude our series on the church as both a place and a people.

So far we have seen church as people

designed for worship,
encouraged to be disciples,
passionate about prayer,
filled with the Spirit,
part of God's family,
people who share Good News
people who serve others
and today we put it all together. The last verse of our poem says:

I dream of a liberated church:
Liberated from tradition,
Liberated from self centredness,
Liberated from duty,
Liberated from pressure of time,
Liberated to serve the world,
Liberated to serve one another,
Liberated to serve God!

Today our theme is liberation.

Over the next few weeks we're going to hear politicians and pundits talking about how good or bad a particular policy has been or will be. And each 'side' will put their own spin on things: one group might point to decreasing unemployment, while another will say that many of the 'new' jobs are on 0 hours contracts. We need to work out for ourselves who to listen to. I will tell you that I think you should vote, but never say who to vote for. Whatever your political views it seems that the country has gone through a difficult time with more to come, whoever gets voted in.

The Church of Scotland has a crisis in that not enough people are training for ministry – 15 started this year and there are 125 vacant charges. Numbers attending worship are plummeting across the board, and in every denomination.

We are having our annual meeting after this service and we'll see that our income for 2014 was nearly £8000 less than 2013, and for the first time the café made a loss. It could be easy to be discouraged.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, it would have been just as easy, if not easier, to be discouraged. In the time between Paul's first and second letters to the Thessalonians the persecution of the church actually got worse, the church was literally hiding and in fear for their lives.

Then not only that, but in the time between the two letters from Paul, someone else wrote them a letter stating that Jesus had already come back and they were left behind, so they were really discouraged.

I believe that although there are things that are difficult for us we should not be discouraged, in fact, through faith in God we should be liberated.

I think this passage gives us three ways that help us to be liberated from fear and discouragement.

Liberation through problems

One of the hardest things to do when things aren't going so well is to praise God, and to actually thank him for the hard times. Our challenge is not the same as our brothers and sisters in Syria and Iraq, or even other more moderate Muslim countries. We don't suffer that sort of persecution but we are nevertheless in a spiritual battle and we see the consequences of it in society and church.

People used to smuggle bibles into Russia and China and we wondered what would have happened to the church in those countries. When the Berlin Wall fell we discovered that rather than having been wiped out the church was thriving. The church is also thriving in China, and in many countries around the world the church is growing. The struggles they went through helped to strengthen the believers.

In the middle of their struggle the faith and love of the Thessalonians was growing. We need to decide how to respond to the different situations we face. We can say, "Woe is me" or we can turn to God and seek his help. Paul never prays that the Thessalonians might be delivered from their persecution because it was drawing them closer to God.

So, our reaction to the situations we face as a community of God's people can either hold us back or liberate us – the Thessalonians found that trusting God brought them freedom to live in a way that honoured him and the church grew despite the opposition they faced.

Liberation through God's promises

No matter how hard the situation was for the Thessalonians Paul reminded them that they had a glorious future. In fact, he says that their suffering is evidence that God is working out his plan for them. Sometimes we imagine that suffering means God is not there or that he has forgotten us, when the opposite is true.

Not only that but the way we deal with difficulties speaks to others about our faith. We need to be realistic, acknowledging issues when they arise, but if we bury our heads and wring our hands people will quite rightly wonder about the truth and value of our faith.

On the other hand, if, even in the face of problems (perhaps especially in the face of problems), we turn to prayer and respond in faith, expecting God to act then we and others looking on will be blessed when we see God answer.

We may not look at it the same way but it was a comfort to the Thessalonians to be reminded that their persecutors would one day face the judgement of God and be found wanting. One day Jesus will appear to bring justice and judgement. The righteous will be saved through faith while those who do not know or acknowledge God will be condemned.

It is faith in God and his promises that enables us to live for him despite the difficulties we face. It is believing the promises of God that frees us to face each day and to trust God to fulfil his plans in us.

Liberation through prayer

Paul writes, “With this in mind.” What is in mind? Vv. 1-10: The fact that your faith is growing, your love is increasing, you are hanging in there during the hard times, justice and judgment is coming to those who reject God and abuse and mistreat you, and final and ultimate salvation is coming for those of you who trust in Jesus! With this in mind, Paul says, we are constantly praying for you. What does he pray, and what can we learn from it?

That they would be considered worthy of His calling

They had been called by God to that place for that time and they were responding in faith and love. Paul prays that this would continue so that they would represent Jesus in such a way as to bring him glory – that even in the face of persecution they would continue to trust him.

That God would fulfil their every good purpose

There may be a number of purposes for your life: God’s, Satan’s, yours, and other people’s. This is all about bringing your purposes or intentions into alignment with God’s! It has to do with moral conduct. Now, good moral conduct cannot save us or make us right with God, but it is part of God’s purpose for us! 1 Thessalonians 4:3 *It is God’s will that you should be holy.*

So, the Thessalonian believers had demonstrated perseverance (a never give up mentality) in the face of persecution for their faith and they had demonstrated faith, love and Godly living! What Paul seems to be praying here is that God would help them follow through with these things and be faithful to Him to the very end!

That God would fulfil every faith prompted act

Faith-prompted actions are the things we do because of our trust in God. They are things we do that are in response to the call of God: to love our neighbour, to fight for justice, to feed the hungry and so on. But they are also things that are beyond our

own capacity – meeting together for worship every week is an act prompted by faith – starting a foodbank is an act prompted by faith. One is general, one is specific but they both come about because we have faith.

We learn to be generous with those in need because God is like that, and we want to be like Him! It wasn't enough for these Christ followers to simply begin these faith acts and then let them taper off. No. Paul knew they would need God's help to keep them obeying Him, loving others, being generous, and serving those around them.

God won't honour every decision we make – sometimes we get it wrong. Sometimes we act on our own ideas, our own plans and what we think is right. Faith implies that we have listened to God, that we have heard his instruction and acted on it. When we act in faith God will honour what we do.

That the name of Jesus would be glorified

The result of following through with our good intentions to remain faithful to God – even in the midst of persecution – is that people will see Jesus in us! Instead of doing good things so we can receive attention from others, we must live so that others will notice Jesus at work in us!

People need to see Jesus being glorified or spotlighted in your life. Matthew 5:16 *In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

If you've looked at our website or written material – even the sheet you have today, you may have noticed that it says that at MPN we are about connecting with God, each other, and the world.

I want to talk briefly about how we are doing that at the Annual Meeting in a few minutes but, for now, I want to acknowledge the difficulties we face as a congregation e.g there are financial pressures; congregational demographics; problems in the C of S.

My call to us all today is to be faithful – God has called us here, to this place, for this time. When we trust his promises and seek his plans and purposes he will be faithful. When we come to him in prayer he will hear and answer our prayers. So let us live so that we are worthy of his calling.