

6.6.07 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 midweekchurch 1 Thess 5 (mid)

In preparing for the Tweed Heads 95th anniversary service, I learnt a lot about the history of our Church family. Did you know for example that the Tweed Heads Parish was originally a preaching centre of Tumbulgum that was given its own status in 1908? Or that in 1909, our home missionary was killed in a horse and sulky accident on Bilambil Hill? Did you know that a cyclone destroyed the preaching centre of Bilambil in 1972? Or that a dead body was found under the Tweed Church in 1998 that had been there for over 14 years without anyone knowing that it was there?

Who knows what other skeletons are in the closet that might come out as we approach our 100th anniversary. Because the Church is a living organisation. It is not just a building, nor a succession of ministers. It's a family, a Church family. And like our own natural families, it is built on relationships.

And so before Paul completes his letter to the Thessalonians, he wants to say something about Church relationships. Sure God has shown these new Christians love and has chosen them and call them to live a life worthy of the gospel. But that life, that faith, will be shown out and tested through all sorts of relationships. And the first type of relationship that Paul says we must live out our faith in, is in relation

1. To our Leaders. Look with me at verse 12 & 13. *“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”*

Respecting our leaders, holding our leaders in the highest regard, it's a very un- Australian thing to do isn't it? In the United States, leaders are placed on a pedestal. In Asia they are revered. In Australia, we like to bring down the tall poppies, not respect them. Think for a moment of an Australian leader that is universally respected? Political leaders? Unlikely! Businessmen? Alan Bond was pretty popular when he won the America's Cup, but he didn't stay respected for very long. Academics? Church Leaders?

The only leader I can remember that almost everyone really respected was Sir William Deane and I think we liked him because he refused to do what the government told him to do. You see we Australians are descended from convicts and we have developed a convict like mentality - that of anti authoritarianism. We are cynical about our leaders.

But here Paul says that in the Church, things should be different. Elsewhere he says we should listen to our bosses, obey our leaders, pray for our politicians and here he says we should respect those who work hard amongst us. Respect those who are over us. Respect even those who admonish us. Hold them in the highest regard for their work. Live in peace with one another.

So when we see someone putting in the hard yards we don't try and knock them down a peg. When we see that someone is pointing out how we can grow in the faith, we don't tell him where he can go jump. When someone is teaching or preaching, we respectfully listen to what they say because we want to grow in the Christian faith.

And if we aspire to be leaders ourselves, the model is not the foreman who leans on his shovel and yells out orders. Or the coach, dreaming up strategies for someone else to complete. Or even the politician, trying to be well liked. It is instead all about service and hard work. Its about modelling

the Christian life in word and in deed. Its about having the love of a mother and the commitment of a father. Its about humility and gentleness and dedication. And if we have these sorts of leaders we need to respect them.

Do we have those sorts of leaders within our Church? Personally I think we do. Our leadership team are all highly committed, and make many sacrifices. Our kidschurch and Scripture teachers and small group leaders work hard in preparation and do many, many great things behind the scenes. We may not have many leaders, but those we do have are worthy of our respect. Not because of their title, but because of their actions. But if you disagree, then show them up by your own ability to work hard and model Christian leadership .

Personally for me the hardest thing involved in leadership, is when there is opposition from within. Ask any general, the most draining thing on a soldier's moral and they will tell you about casualties from friendly fire. Yet in too many Churches, we see people at loggerheads, painful division, or a complete apathy to what the leadership is saying. And that causes great pain and damage to the Church and to the leaders.

Putting it another way, leadership is a little bit like a big brother or a big sister in a big family. In the past when there was 9 or 10 or 12 kids, the older kids often stood in for the parents and helped the younger ones to grow and mature. And in the Church, leaders are like our big brothers and sisters who are helping out our heavenly father in the family business. We need to respect them for the work they do.

2. With each other. But just because we have leaders doesn't mean that they do all the work. For the next area of relationships that Paul points to is our relationships with each other. And Paul says, to all the members of the Church in verse 14. *“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”*

You see he is pointing out to us three particular groups in the Church whom all the brothers and sisters are to care for. Firstly there is the idle, you need to warn them. It is our responsibility to warn those in the Church who are not pulling their weight, who are leaving the work up to just a few. For the model of Church is not like a bus, with a driver taking the rest of us where we want to go. It is more like an orchestra, where a conductor encourages each musician to play their part and together find harmony.

Why do we need to warn the idle? Because the idle will never put their faith into action, they will never encourage others in their faith & they will not grow in their faith, because they take rather than give, they are served rather than serve.

But we are also to encourage the timid. For some people who are doing little are not idle they are just plain scared. They think they have no role, they believe they have no gifts, these people don't need warning, they need encouragement. And then we are to help the weak. Hold on to them. Put your arm around them. Cling to them even. Life is at times difficult. Events do blow the wind out of our sails. All of us at times are weak. And there the physical help of God's people can make a tremendous difference.

In reviewing the book *God in the dock: through grief and beyond*, journalist Margaret Smith writes “Through the book, Luci calls out to God asking like the Psalmist, “Where are you? I call but you don't answer. You have left me alone.... “If she hasn't abandoned God in this crisis and if God has promised to be with her always, then where is He?... Throughout the book, friends flit in

and out like fireflies, giving off brief sparks in the darkness telling Luci in a thousand thoughtful ways that they (and God) love her. But while she appreciates these friends, Luci never seems to connect the two wires: Where is God? And here are God's people."

Now it is important we get these instructions right. We don't want to warn the weak and encourage the idle. No we need to find a way where we are patient with everyone. Because not only will all Churches have the idle, the timid and the weak in its ranks, but each one of us sometime in our life will be timid or idle or weak. So we are doing to others what we would hope they will do for us in return.

Then Paul says, we should make sure we don't pay back wrong for wrong, but instead find a way to be kind to each other and everyone else. And Christians who believe in the God of kindness are better placed to do this more than anyone else. You may remember the story of Jim Elliot, the young missionary man martyred by the Auca Indians, well do you know that 12 months later Elizabeth Elliot his wife turned up to witness to the very same people who killed her husband.

A few years ago Graeme Staines was killed by some militant Hindus in India. Twelve months later his wife Gladys turns up to continue his work with the leprosy mission. John Valshone in the Phantom of the Opera steals the cutlery box of the bishop, is caught by the police and taken to the Church man who says to him, "here is the candlesticks, why didn't you take them as well." Surprising kindness not revenge. Because we attempt to reflect the kindness, the mercy, the love of God unto us.

We are a Church family and yes we have a relationship with our leaders, our big brothers and sister in the faith. But we also have close relationships with our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith. We are a family and as a family we may have our fights, our disagreements, our clash of personalities, but we need to stick together so that we can please God. And so together we can show the grace of God in our lives.

(3. With our God). But if our relationships with our leaders and each other are important, the relationship that is the basis of all this is our relationship with God, our Heavenly Father. So Paul now gives us a grab bag of commands, that all have to do with how we relate to an unseen Father.

"Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Joy, when we come together, it is not all seriousness and sour faces. Its not just confession and learning. We need to be a joyful people, because as we meet together we are to remember *How great thou art*, we need to *Shout to the Lord*. We reflect on *Jesus my Lord*, we remember what happened *at the cross* and ensure everyone knows *What a friend we have in Jesus*. And recounting these truths should bring us Joy.

Which should lead us to constant prayer. Prayers of praise and prayers of confession. Of thanks and of intercession. Prayer should overflow from our hearts as we want to keep the communications channels with God opened 24/7. And that is not just one person praying for us all, we need to all pray for each other, Paul is saying to you, pray continually. So that will mean that we will need to learn how to pray by ourselves and in a group. For personal things and for public issues.

John Stott in thinking on this verse says *"I sometimes wonder if the comparatively slow progress toward world peace, world equity and world evangelisation is not due, more than anything else, to the prayerlessness of the people of God."*

Give thanks in all circumstances, not give thanks for all circumstances. Not everything that happens to us is nice or good. But everything that happens to us is part of God's plan and so we can be thankful to Him that He is with us in the midst of everything. As Christians, thankfulness should be one of our characteristics, even in the midst of the darkest days.

Joy-Prayer-Thanks should be our responses to what God has done for us. And yet for a relationship to grow, we can't just rely on the things that God has done in the past. He continues to draw near to us on a daily basis. So because of that "*Do not put out the Spirit's fire*". God wants our relationship with Him to be red hot and so he gives us His Spirit as a mark of His presence.

So don't ignore the Spirit's promptings. Don't walk away from the Spirit's leadings. Don't suppress the Spirit's convictions. Don't say we have never done that this way before. Don't pour cold water on the Spirit's ministry. Stoke it. Fan it into flame. Allow it to shine and give off heat. Otherwise your daily trust in God will grow cold.

And don't forget that the Spirit and the Word normally work together. So "*do not treat prophecies with contempt.*" When someone correctly explains the word of God to you, listen to them, don't switch off. When someone prophetically applies the message of Jesus to your situation, evaluate it by the Scriptures. "*Test everything. Hold on to the good. (And) avoid every kind of evil.*"

Even though you respect your leaders and you are committed to your fellow Christians, don't just accept whatever they tell you. Be like the Bereans, when the apostle Paul came to town. Go back to the Scriptures and see whether what is being said is right. If it is, hold onto it. If it isn't, avoid it like the plague. Just because a Presbyterian minister says it, doesn't make it right. Whole congregations have been led astray, in one Presbyterian Church in Victoria a few years ago a cult developed.

And cults come when you accept what someone says slavishly. Don't do that! Don't treat the truth lightly or error flippantly. *Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.*

But in the end realise that your relationship with your Heavenly Father will be powered by God Himself. He promises to sanctify you, cleanse you, through and through. He is the one able to keep you body, soul and spirit blameless on the last day. He is the one who is faithful. He will do it. We just have to daily put our trust in Him.

The letter has been a way where the Apostle Paul has got beside us and encouraged us. It was a bit like what happened to world famous pianist and composer Ignace Jan Paderewski. He was preparing to give a concert one evening when a group of admirers came to the concert hall. One of those was a mother with her young son who was quite reluctantly taking piano lessons. She thought by bringing him to hear the great Paderewski he would gain a renewed interest in the piano.

This young mother turned to friends and was engaging in a conversation while junior was getting bored. His attention was drawn to the beautiful ebony grand piano on the stage. The lad rose from his seat in the auditorium and headed for the piano. Immediately he went to work on *Chopsticks!* The audience began to turn its attention to the piano. Suddenly there was uproar. "Who brought this kid to the concert?" "Who does he think he is?" "Get him out of here!"

But not Paderewski. He rapidly puts on his coat and slips up behind the boy on the piano bench

and puts his arms around the boy and begins playing the counter measure as he whispers in the lad's ear. "Go ahead. You're doing great. That's it. Keep it up! You're OK. Don't listen to the noise. Come on let's keep going. You are doing fine." They went on and finished in style to the utter amazement of the audience.

Likewise God Himself has slipped behind us. He will turn our chopsticks into something wonderful. He will give us His wisdom, strength, power and encouragement. So don't give up. Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. For the one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.