

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Reading: Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

Date: 4 September 2016

Theme: HDU Farewell

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you ...

This is a very short letter. It's a letter from Paul and Timothy to a small group of people we don't know much about: Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church in his house ...

Paul is in prison and therefore cannot be with them. But as he thinks back to time spent with them, time where they shared life together, he says some simple but very important things.

As we prepare to say goodbye and move to Farnham, and as I look back over 18 years here at HTS, and offer you some words of encouragement for the future, Paul's simple focus is really helpful – he keeps the main thing, the main thing.

As he reflects on his time with his friends, he speaks about:

Their love for all the saints

Their faith toward the Lord Jesus

Their sharing of their faith – offering hope to a needy world

Love. Faith. Hope. Very familiar words in our vision statement: to live by faith, to be known by love, to be a voice of hope.

This is the context in which he asks them a huge favour. Onesimus is someone they all know. He has history and he has previous, and their recollection of him will not bring them joy. Even Paul himself says he was useless. But things have changed, Onesimus has changed and Paul wants them to welcome this guy and give him a second chance. He wants their love, faith and hope to be expressed in how they receive Onesimus: because how we live, how we regard people, how we respond to someone who has changed, repented and started over again is evidence of the power of God at work in the world.

Love: For all the saints ...

Church is a funny thing. People come to church for all kinds of reasons and from all kinds of backgrounds. Church is one of the few places where difference and variety is celebrated, where we learn to get along even if naturally and in many other ways we have little in common.

We have just had a weekend at Center Parcs. It was lovely to spend time with the family, with our children and their other halves. As you probably know, there is crazy golf, swimming, tennis, badminton, a spa and lots of cycle routes. There is much more, of course – out on the water and high up in the trees.

CP is a great leveller ... it doesn't matter what your background is or what your life is like at home, there you are just a guest and you just get on with it.

And we can all do that for a day or two ... church is a place where we share life all the time, every day, every week, month after month, year after year. And it's a challenge. So for Paul to speak of their love for the saints, he is speaking about something sustained and ongoing, about give and take, about sacrifice and surrender.

If HTS (or Farnham for that matter) is known for such a thing, that is very good news. Love for all the saints.

Faith: Toward the Lord Jesus ...

We have had the most extraordinary summer ... it started with the referendum and the vote to remain or leave; the PM's resignation, a contest for a replacement, Boris disappearing and re-emerging, the Labour Party in disarray, the start of the football season, the Olympic Games to take our minds off it all and now the Paralympics

on a shoestring to bring us inspiration and joy and at times to move us to tears.

Parties and teams of all different kinds. Brought together by political ideology or economic frustration, by love for sport or by willingness to push beyond normal human endurance to great physical achievement.

Church may have all of these kinds of people in it too – but none of these is the defining characteristic of us. It is faith toward the Lord Jesus which sets us apart and for which we are known with all our difference, variety, strengths and weaknesses.

I can remember being so encouraged a few months ago when we asked you to write your own creed ... what were the important things in your mind when you thought about what we stood for, about what we were about. There were so many references to Jesus and our relationship with him which is lovely and really encouraging. Obviously, we hoped we would see that ... but it was great to see it articulated and written down.

So Paul is speaking about their love for all the saints and their faith toward the Lord Jesus.

And finally, he speaks about their sharing of their faith – offering hope to a needy world

Hope: sharing faith

Church is not always confident about this. We are not always sure we have the words to say. We are not always ready with an answer to a tricky question or always “on it” when someone unexpectedly puts us on the spot.

Maybe we need to pray that God would help us to be better about the opportunities he gives ... to make him known, to include him in the landscape, to get him onto people’s radar.

And I think we do this by practising ... a friend of mine is very poorly at the moment. One of my oldest friends has cancer. He had it when he was a schoolboy and it has returned twice since. We don’t know what the future holds for him. We receive the regular updates by text and we can visit and face-time and keep in touch. But the simple short message which tells us good news about his treatment and his progress is very easy to send and really great to receive.

We can do this kind of thing ... sharing good news in our everyday conversation: God is good. Can I pray for you? What would Jesus do? Have you ever thought about ...?

Sharing faith, sharing good news is at one level so simple, but it is also scary. And yet, drawing people in to the life of faith, to the world as Jesus sees it, to the lens through

which God the Father sees us, is not hard ... we just need to practise.

The final things Paul says really resonates with me from an encounter we had very recently ... as people moving house we were asked if we would be happy to receive a gift from one of our ministries: Caring Cuisine. A relatively new church member had cooked something wonderful which we really enjoyed; and the meal was delivered also by someone quite new to church life who asked if they could pray for us and with us.

Paul says ...

I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you ...

We shall miss lots of things about HTS ... and to begin to mention names is to set myself up for a fall. Why didn’t he mention him? Why didn’t he say about her? I thought he might have said something about me!

You know who you are. And you know what we have shared together. Some very publicly. Some very privately. You are bound together in faith, love and hope. And whatever the future may hold, like Paul with his friends, we will never forget you as we pray for you and hold you in our hearts. Amen.