**1 THESSALONIANS. 4:9-18 Keep up the good work**

Accentuate the positive!

I started my teaching career back in 1975 – the year Jay & I were married. I taught for ten years or so, and then we had our family. After doing something quite different for the next 25 years, I then found myself back in the classroom, this time as a Scripture teacher.

School was still school, but the thing I noticed that had changed markedly was the way teachers related to the children when bringing order and discipline into the classroom. Instead of raised voices and threats aimed at those who were doing the wrong thing, it was a quietly spoken compliment aimed at the children who are doing the RIGHT thing. “It’s lovely to see the back row sitting so quietly,” the teacher would say. Or “Thank you Tony, for being so helpful.” It really is most effective, and creates a lovely positive atmosphere in the classroom.

In today’s New Testament reading, Paul also “accentuates the positive”. He was writing to the church in the busy seaport of Thessalonica in Greece. The church was mostly Gentile in its make-up and many were converts from paganism. Paul started the church, but wasn’t able to stay long, so the members were left without much support in the face of considerable persecution.

Paul wrote this letter to encourage the young church, to instruct them about what God expected of them when it came to godly living, and to correct some wrong ideas some of them had. It was an important letter for the Thessalonian church, and was followed by a second letter sometime later.

We didn’t read the beginning of the letter this morning, but it starts this way: “We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then further on in v6, Paul continues, “…in spite of severe suffering you welcomed the (Christian) message with joy given by the Holy Spirit.”

Then in the part we read this morning, once again, Paul has much encouragement for the believers. He says in 4:1, “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus *to do this more and more.*”

There follows some instruction about how to live to please God, and then again, Paul is very positive. He says, “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you brothers, *to do so more and more.”*

I’m sure that the struggling church in Thessalonica would have felt most encouraged as Paul affirmed them in their faith, and they would have been eager to continue to please God, and receive Paul’s ongoing approval.

Paul is not being manipulative here. He is genuinely encouraged by the Thessalonians’ faith. However, he’s also aware that they cannot sit back and feel they have arrived. Twice he says to them, “You’ve been doing this really well – *but keep up the good work!*” He tells them - “*do it more and more!”*

We all need to hear this affirmation, don’t we? We all need to be encouraged.

I want to take the opportunity this morning, prompted by these positive words of Paul, to encourage you all in your faith – and let you know that our church is also doing really well.

A case in point: Towards the end of last year, we were faced with a challenge with regard to our assets. Would we keep them safely in the bank, or would we invest in something that would give us an opportunity to minister in some way to our community?

Without a lot of specific guidance from the Lord, other than an opportunity before us, and circumstances falling amazingly into place – we took a step of faith and purchased the cottage next door to the church. I know that was a difficult thing to do for some folk, because it meant stepping into unknown territory - so particular affirmation needs to go to those who found it difficult, but still supported the church in its decision.

As you know, the cottage needed a lot of work; and although the specific purpose for this decision was still not clear, both congregations were amazingly generous with their time and resources, and very soon the cottage was transformed. We also received a $10,000 donation from some regular visitors to our parish who caught the vision one Sunday when they were here and felt God wanted them to support us.

Then God made his plan clear – we were to support a refugee family. Again God brought things together and we have been blessed as a church to welcome among us a beautiful family. This family, like many others in their situation, has had the sort of journey that, if we knew all the details, would make our blood run cold.

As you will know, their situation has not got any easier since they’ve been here – in fact it has become increasingly more difficult and stressful for them. Without a visa, they have been forbidden to work. They have been given permission to remain in the country, but without the ability to support themselves. There have been medical and dental needs – but they have had no means of paying for them.

There have been school expenses and utility bills – none of which they have been able to meet for themselves. Other than the most basic of needs, such as putting food on their table, they have had to rely on the generosity of the church and the community. I’m sure you can imagine how that would make a family feel.

I want to affirm you all as a church. Paul’s words to the Thessalonians apply to you. He said to them that he didn’t need to instruct them about how to love one another – God had already taught them that, and they loved people far more widely their own circle.

This church is doing that! You also have shown great love for others in this way. You have continued to be wonderfully generous and supportive. The family has shared with me that they have been completely blown away by the love and generosity of the people in this church. They said that they have never before met people like us. So, thanks be to God for all of you.

This morning, I need to share with you some sad news. Selva let me know last Sunday evening, that they just couldn’t carry on any more, and that they needed to move back to Canberra if they were to survive.

I’ve had a week to process this – so I know for those of you who haven’t yet heard the news, this will come as a shock. The obvious question is WHY?

Selva asked if I could please try and explain things to you all. The last thing in the world he or Juliat want to do is to cause anyone hurt or offence, because everyone in the church has been so generous and loving and supportive towards them, and they love us all.

But they can’t go on. Both Selva & Juliat are now struggling with depression. Selva is dangerously low. The mental health team has been involved, but here in this region, there is great demand on their services, and they have been unable to provide the level of support the family needs. In Canberra they would have access to much more in the way of assistance and counselling services.

The children have been subjected to a degree of racism at the school - which is shocking – but it has been their experience. Lawrence in particular has grown to hate going to school. He really, REALLY doesn’t want to attend Narooma high next year. The kids are running really scared. In Canberra, they were part of a much more multicultural environment, where their nationality made no difference whatsoever. They had friends, and they were happy at school.

In the three years the family were in Canberra, they all made some friends, and they have some family members there as well. Here they feel completely cut off from them, which is all the more difficult as their need for family and friends is so acute.

Then there are issues around medical and dental services. Here in Narooma, the family is no longer under the care of the ACT Red Cross. The Red Cross in Canberra had the resources to assist with medical & dental bills. Though there has still been some assistance available, at times it has taken weeks to organise, when the family has needed immediate attention. It’s been very stressful for them.

Transport is another issue. The car that the family has is borrowed – it was thought that their visa would come through before this and they would be able to find work and get their own car. Of course this hasn’t happened. The person who owns the car now needs it back, and there is not much in the way of public transport in this region. If they were back in Canberra, this wouldn’t matter so much, as public transport is so much better.

And then there are opportunities that they are missing because of our location. Again, in Canberra, there are many programs available to help refugee families, run by the Red Cross and other charities. There are driving courses, language courses, recreational courses and vocational courses, none of which are available here.

They are a family in deep crisis, and while they really value the support and love they have received from us, they need more than we are able to provide in either the church or the community.

So – the most loving thing we are able to do at this time, is to let them go; and to let them go, with them knowing that they leave with our complete support and ongoing prayers.

One of the questions Selva asked was about the furniture. They have nothing of their own. I said, ‘take it with you.’

When Paul praised the Thessalonians for their faith, hope and love, he followed that with the exhortation to “do so more and more.”

This church is also full of faith, hope and love, and I’m confident that we too can “do so more and more.” - in that the generosity that has enveloped this beautiful family while they’ve been here will also go with them as they take this step that is so necessary for the well-being of their family.

Let’s pray.