Love that Gives and Courage that Stands
1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

A couple of weekends ago we took my mother and step-father to Gruyere to taste their meringues and double crème. And whilst we were there some guys in traditional dress arrived and began playing their alphorns in the middle of the street, which was just wonderful. But watching this, I couldn't help noticing the selfie-sticks. And it struck me that here in this beautiful historic town, with these men playing this moving music in the High Street, one couldn't just observe it, or take a photo of it, there is this urge to put yourself at the centre of the picture.

And back in January, David Carr, the New York Times journalist, having witnessed the battle of the selfie-sticks on New Year's Eve in Time's Square, wrote an article in which he describes the age old 'urge to stare at one-self.' And in response he called the selfie-stick the 'narcissistick.'

Now, if you know your Greek mythology you'll know that Narcissus is this strikingly handsome young man, who becomes so caught up in himself that he won't let others near him. And to pay him back, one of the gods lures him to a pool of water, where he sees his own reflection and falls in love with himself. And so enamoured with his own image is he that he cannot bring himself to leave it. And he eventually ends up killing himself because he realizes that he can never have the object of his desire.

And the moral of the story is that narcissism, this being in love with yourself, this loving yourself above others, this wanting to be at the centre, destroys. And it destroys relationships with others, but ultimately it also destroys you. And arguably, today, we live in *the* most self-absorbed time in history, and the selfie-stick is just the physical embodiment of that. And if we look at the state of relationships, or families, or communities then we don't have to look long before we see evidence that things are not going well when we all want to be the one at the centre of the picture.

Which is what makes Paul's evident love for his fellow Christians in Thessalonica all the more striking.

Deep Relationships
Now over the last couple of weeks we've seen how Paul had to defend himself for what he was like when he was present in Thessalonica. But now, he has to mount a defence, not for his *presence* with them, but his *absence* from them; for why, after fleeing the city following a riot, he had not been back. But in doing so Paul tells his friends just how much he really does love them.

Look at what he writes in v17: 'But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart…'

Now, there are some places you're glad to leave, aren't there? Like Bognor Regis. When I was a teenager we moved house to Bognor, which is a seaside town on the South Coast of England. It's a town made famous by King George V who when his doctor suggested on his death bed that he should recuperate in Bognor let it be known in rather colourful language exactly what he thought of the place. And it's never recovered! In fact, whenever my mother was asked where we lived she would reply Chichester, which is a nice upmarket city nearby, because it sounded

so much posher than Bognor. Or imagine staying in a rough hotel, or visiting some difficult relations for the weekend. There are times when you're happy to say goodbye to somewhere, to leave it behind, aren't there. But that's not how Paul saw his forced departure from Thessalonica.

He says he was 'torn away' from them. And the verb he uses for 'torn away' was one that literally meant 'to be orphaned', to have your parents, or your children torn away from you. So earlier in chapter two he described his attitude to them as being like a nursing mother, then a devoted father, but now, being absent from them is like having members of his family ripped away. This hurts him.

Now of course if that happened today, you'd Facebook, or Whatsapp the friends you've left behind, but even if that had existed then, it would never have done for Paul, because as he says in v17, what he wanted above all was to see them 'face to face'. So this is not some kind of shallow, superficial thing that he feels toward them, is it? This is not a polite handshake on a Sunday morning to maintain an arm's-length relationship. Contrary to what he might be being accused of, he wanted with all his heart to see them again – and to see them in person.

And yet that hadn't happened. He tells us in v18, 'but Satan hindered us.' Now he doesn't tell us what he means by that, but the effect of this enforced absence wasn't to decrease his desire to see them – out of sight out of mind, it increased it, as he says in v17 how he 'endeavoured *the more eagerly* and with great desire' to make that happen. And v18, 'we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, *again and again*.'

So Paul's love for them was real, it was intense. And then look how he describes them in v19-20: 'And what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.' Now what do you think of when you hear the word, *crown*? The kind of crown a king or queen might wear? Except when Paul talks about them being his 'crown of boasting' he's not thinking of that kind of crown. Instead, the word he uses is the word for the laurel wreath that the winner at the Olympic games would be awarded. So he's saying: 'you guys in Thessalonica, you are our Olympic gold medal. If we had a trophy cabinet, where we put our awards on display, you guys would take pride of place.' That was how Paul viewed his friends and community back in Thessalonica. They were what he gloried in. They were his joy.

Now, I was chatting to someone this week and he told me that Westlake is 'a sexy church'. And I nearly choked on my mashed potato. I had never thought about it like that before! But how would you describe your relationships with your friends and Christian brothers and sisters here? Paul has this deep, real, intense love for them. They are his joy. Is that how you see your community here? Do have relationships like that?

Albert Camus the French philosopher wrote that 'to be happy we must not be too concerned with others.' And, sure, there is a level of anxiety about others that is not helpful. And yet we all know the destruction that selfishness and self-centredness can wreak in our relationships. And we start off thinking that getting my way, and being in the centre, is the way to joy and happiness, but we end up

more miserable and more alone than ever. But here Paul is saying, joy, lasting joy, joy that stretches into eternity, lies in deep, loving relationships.

And who wouldn't want that kind of joy, or to enjoy those kind of friendships? And yet what we see here is that those come from a love that puts others, and their needs, first.

A Love that Sacrifices

Now one of the challenges of becoming a father of teenage girls is that boys start showing up. Or, in our case, a *particular* boy starts showing up on the doorstep rather a lot. And your daughter starts going out for the day with him and not with you. And you sit, abandoned, on the sofa looking at your watch, wondering what's become of them, and they've only been gone 10 minutes. And you sit waiting for them to come home. And when your wife tells you, 'no news is good news darling' it doesn't quite do the trick. But at least we have mobile phones. At least I can phone my daughter and check she's ok. Not, of course, that I'd ever dream of phoning my daughter on a date!

But when you love someone, separation can make anxiety grow can't it? And because he is like a father to them, Paul knew what that felt like. Look how he describes it in v1 'when we could bear it no longer' and v5, 'when I could bear it no longer.' So imagine a pan with a lid on. And inside that pan is water, and you start heating that pan up or putting that water under pressure; eventually the lid will start to lift up, won't it, and water will start flowing over the top. And Paul's love and concern for these Thessalonians was so strong that eventually he couldn't hold it in any more, he wanted to hear news of them, he wanted to know how they were doing, and how they were doing in their faith.

But just look at how he describes that decision: v1, 'When we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy our brother and God's co-worker.' Now maybe some in Thessalonica saw Paul sending Timothy as a cheap substitute for the real thing, for Paul coming himself. But that's not how Paul sees it. For one, Timothy was a guy of stature: 'our brother and God's coworker' is some attestation. But secondly, this decision was costly for Paul.

You see when Paul says he was willing to be left *alone*, he uses a word that has the sense of being abandoned, of being left *all* alone. And being separated from them, he already feels like an orphan. But on top of that, by this time he was in Athens, which was pretty spiritually dark. Not only that, but the intellectual elites of the city were publically ridiculing him for his preaching, and he was seeing little in the way of fruit for his work. So whether he was having to battle discouragement or just plain loneliness, this was a time when Paul wanted, needed his teammate with him.

But for the sake of the Thessalonians he sends Timothy back to them. He would rather be abandoned himself, than abandon them. He would rather be left alone than leave them alone. And he did it, because he loved them more than he loved himself.

But if you think about it, that is what true love does, doesn't it? It gives.

The late Christopher Hitchens, one of the new Atheists, said this about religion and selfishness: "We keep on being told that religion, whatever its imperfections, at least instills morality. On every side, there is conclusive evidence that the contrary is the case and that faith causes people to be more mean, more selfish, and perhaps above all, more stupid." And sadly, you've probably experienced something of what he means there. And yet the very atheistic naturalism that Hitchins promotes has a hard time explaining *why* we should love and care for the sick, or the dying, or the poor or the weak at all.

But the faith and the love Paul is living out here has no trouble doing that! Because this kind of love is willing to pay the price of love. It's prepared to suffer loss for the sake of the one you love. So, it is the exact opposite of narcissistic, self absorbed, self-centred love, wherever that is found – in atheism or religion or anywhere in between.

You see, we can be so wrapped up with our own needs, or what we want, that we miss the very thing we are seeking, which is happiness. In fact, as we've seen already, more than miss it, self-centredness destroys it. But this kind of love, the love that puts others before yourself, doesn't destroy, it builds and makes strong. In a world where communities and relationships are all over the place, this kind of sacrificial love has the power to build friendships and marriages and churches and communities. And far from robbing you of happiness, Paul tells us it brings lasting joy and glory.

But to live like that is so counter-cultural, both then and now, that if you want to live like that you will face opposition, from without and from within.

A Threatened Faith

Now why is Paul so concerned for them in his absence? Well he tells us in v3. He's concerned that they'll be 'moved by these afflictions'. That the opposition they are facing will seriously unsettle them. You see, bizarrely, at that time, these early Christians were accused of being atheists, just as the Jewish people had been accused before them, because they refused to worship the Greek and Roman gods. And it was the gods, of course, who sent good harvests, and protected from natural disasters, and gave victory in battle. So if you refused to bow down to them or make sacrifices to them, it's as if you were making yourself an enemy, not just of the state, but of your neighbor as well: I mean, why wouldn't you want a good harvest, or peace in the land? Do you *want* to bring trouble on us? Do you hate us *that* much? So these guys in Thessalonica were facing significant social pressure to de-convert, to conform, and when they refused to do that, they were ostracized and faced growing oppression.

Now, there is a type of book that talks about you reaching your destiny, that God has great plans for you and you can achieve your destiny, if you follow these 6 steps. But look what Paul writes about here, v3-4: 'For you yourselves know that *we are destined for this*. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction.' Now, I don't read many books on finding my destiny, but I suspect that telling people they are destined to suffer

persecution or be excluded socially if they walk in Jesus' footsteps doesn't make it into many of those books. Because it ain't going to sell many copies. And yet Jesus himself said, 'If they persecuted me' [which they did], 'they will also persecute you' (John 15:20). Elsewhere Paul writes, '*All* who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim 3:12). So, when Peter writes to fellow Christians he says, 'Beloved, *do not be surprised* at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, *as though something strange* were happening to you' (1 Pet 4:12).

In other words, if you want to be a follower of Jesus, you will face trouble for it. It's guaranteed. Now just think about that for you and me. Because the truth is, the values of Jesus run counter to the values of our societies, just as they did for these guys. This sacrificial love that Paul feels and practically shows for these Thessalonians, is at odds with the self-centredness of our own culture. But the interesting thing is that whilst we admire that when they see it in others – for example in a Mother Theresa type figure – it's not so popular when it directly challenges the 'I want my way, I have the right and the freedom to choose for myself, and I must be the centre' mentality that we can all be guilty of. And so where the Christian faith refuses to worship the gods of this age, whether it is self-centre-stage, or the god of personal freedom, or the relativity of truth and the tolerance agenda that goes with it, we can expect push-back, just as these guys were experiencing.

So the question is not, *will I* face trouble for being a Christian, but *how will I respond* when I do? Because when you face pushback from outside it can begin to undermine your faith. You begin to wonder whether you're crazy, whether it's worth the opposition, whether you should just stay quiet. And to use Paul's words, you begin to be moved, you begin to wobble.

But it's not just pressure from without that can do it. It's also temptations from within. Look what Paul says in v5, 'I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you.' And think about the kind of temptations you might face when life is hard, and especially when it's hard because of your faith. There's the temptation to self-pity: 'this shouldn't be happening to me. I deserve better than this.' There's the temptation to doubt: 'If this is happening, maybe God isn't in control at all'. And specifically, there's the temptation to doubt his love for you: 'If God loved me, surely he wouldn't let this happen to me.' And the result of those is that you increasingly turn in on yourself and away from God and from others. You become self-absorbed. And then, both your faith, and your relationships, are threatened.

And so it's because Paul knows that their standing in the faith, and their love for one another, could falter under the pressure and the temptations, that he sends Timothy back to them. Effectively he says goodbye to the friend who could encourage and strengthen him in his own trials, so that Timothy can go and be a friend and encourage and strengthen them.

But where can you find the power to live like that? To turn away from being taken up with yourself and instead love in a way that builds deep relationships. And when you live against the flow like that, where can you find the courage to

stand when you face the difficulties or discouragement that are inevitably going to come your way?

The One Who Works in You

Well, look at how Paul describes Timothy, the guy who's going to encourage them to keep living and loving in a way that pleases God. Verse 2, he is 'our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ.' So if the reason Paul is sending Timothy is because he is God's *co*worker in the gospel, the good news of Jesus, then it must be through the gospel, what Jesus has already done for us, that God is going to work to encourage and enable them and us to live in this counter-cultural way of sacrificial love.

Think about Jesus, think about the good news: he could have stayed in a safe place, where love wouldn't cost him anything, where all the attention was on him. But he gave up all the glory of heaven and came as a man, to put your needs before his own: your need to be forgiven, your need to be reconciled to your heavenly Father. And he was willing to be abandoned by his friends and to be left all alone at the cross, because he did not want you to be left eternally alone. And at the cross, God the Father had his Son torn away from him, and God the Son was separated from his Heavenly Father, and became like an orphan, as our sin was placed upon his shoulders, so that you might become a beloved child of God.

And when you know his love for you like that, really know it, that God your father could not bear it any longer but sent his Son to help you and save you, because he loves you, then you'll find it in you to love like that. You can love sacrificially because you know that you have been loved sacrificially. And others can become your joy and glory, as they were for Paul, because you know they are Jesus' joy and glory.

And you won't be moved by life's trials and difficulties. To be told that you are destined for trials will not be a thing of terror, but a thing of comfort: because you know who holds your destiny in his loving hands.

But also, knowing the good news means you know the power of Jesus' resurrection, so you'll also know the outcome is not in doubt, that Jesus will come as King, as Paul says here. And that totally changes the way you see sacrificial love and any suffering that comes your way. It gives you a totally different end point to live for. As Paul says in Romans 8:18, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'

So it's as God your heavenly Father works his love in your heart that you'll find the desire and the power to love sacrificially, but you'll also find the courage to stand when you face trouble for doing it.