
Dt 34:1-12; Ps 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Th 2:1-8;
Mt 22:34-46

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's 2nd Lesson
is from the earliest
of St Paul's epistles.

He established a church
in Thessalonica
on his first missionary journey.

He recalls it here,
reminded of the suffering
he'd endured at Philippi
before coming to them –
and, in his own words (v. 2):
*...declar[ing] to you
the gospel of God
[again] in spite of
great opposition.*

St Luke recounts it
in greater detail
in Acts 16 and 17.

*

Here, in our epistle,
St Paul now
shifts our attention
to what it is
that motivates him
and his companions.

He insists
(in his own words, v. 4):
*...we speak to please God
who tests our hearts.*

And then (in v. 8)
he adds, as his second motive
(again in his own words):
*So deeply do we care for you...
because you have become
very dear to us.*

Two motives then.

Strikingly,
 motives that exactly
 correspond to our Lord's
 two commands:
Love the Lord your God...;
 love your neighbour as yourself.

*

Much of the rest
 of this morning's text
 identifies, by contrast,
 a diversity of false motives.

No doubt,
 at various times
 throughout St Paul's ministry,
 falsely attributed to him
 by those who opposed him
 and his fellow apostles.

Again, recall our Lord –
 to whom unworthy motives
 were attributed by –
 among others –
 the Pharisees.

And recall too
 his warnings
 to his disciples
 that they too will be
 falsely accused of
 wickedness and deceit.

Back to our text.

The false, *impure motives*
 attributed to St Paul
 and his companions
 include (and I quote):
...deceit, ...trickery, ...flattery,
 ...greed, and – twice repeated –
 ...seeking others' praise.

Are not all of these,
 if we're honest,
 all too familiar to us?

Certainly they are to me.

Indeed,
I pray each morning
to be kept from
yielding to them
by the holy and gracious
Spirit of God.

Bear with me now
as I expand on St Paul's list
with what we may call
a set of variations –
or better, 3 sets
of variations.

*

First...,
what we might call
frenzied drivenness.

At its most basic,
think of drivers of cars
determined to get
to their destination
in the least amount of time –
regardless of speed limits.

But it's much more
the frenzied activism,
anxious, obsessive preoccupation
with tasks at hand,
ruling out even
the briefest pause to
- be still,
- smell the flowers,
- heed the birdsong,
- give time and attention
to associates
except in pursuit
of 'my' goals.

The writer of Ecclesiastes
says it well:
*...there is no end to all their toil,
and their eyes are never
satisfied with riches.*
(Eccl 4.8)

Jesus offers several
exhortations against such
frenzied drivenness:
- his response to Martha

*...worried and distracted
about many things,
when only one thing
is needful –
namely, her sister Mary's
sitting and listening to Jesus.*
(Lk 10.41)

Recall too,
Jesus' extended instructions
against obsession and anxiety
in his sermon on the mount.
(Mt 6.25-33)

*

The second set
of variations
includes conceit,
self-importance,
thinking too highly
of oneself.

Ignoring whatever seems
to contradict my self-image,
or shifting responsibility for it
away from myself on to others,
or making little of it
as minor mistakes
best left behind –
all of this serving only
to enhance my self-image –
not to be compromised
whatever the cost.

We see it
in Jesus' parable
of the pharisee
and the tax collector
at prayer –
the pharisee praying:
*God, I thank you
that I am not like other people....*
(Lk 18.11)

*

The third way
in which *impure motives*
manifest themselves
is very different from these.

It expresses itself
as drowsiness,
carelessness,
laziness.

We may well
be possessed
of good intentions.

Perhaps we've even
given our word that
we will soon be about
whatever it is we've
committed ourselves to.

And yet...,
when the time comes
for putting our good intentions
into practice,
we are found wanting.

Fashioning
this or that excuse,
we back away, step aside,
retreat into our
comfort zone,
and muddle along
our unproductive way,
while all along
beset by one of
the so-called
seven deadly sins – sloth.

Once again,
recall Jesus' parable
about two sons
whose father tells them
to work in the vineyard.

The first refuses
but then does as
his father asked,
while the second assents
but (quoting Matthew)
...*did not go*.
(Mt 21.28-31)

*

Frenzied drivenness,
conceit and self-importance,
carelessness and laziness:

three variations on St Paul's
impure motives.

Again, are they not
all too familiar to us –
not so much in others,
as, if we're honest,
in ourselves?

*

Leaving these
impure motives behind,
in the time left to me,
I return to
St Paul's duo
of true motives –
- pleasing God
- and caring for others.

*

Pleasing God,
loving God,
is practiced above all
in prayer.

Indeed, prayer is
the essential antidote
to frenzied drivenness,
self-conceit, sloth
and the like.

How so?

Prayer requires
our interrupting
our habitual way of life,
shifting our attention
away from ourselves,
and focusing instead on God.

Prayer entails
our being still and silent,
the stillness and silence
of the attentive listener.

In the words of the psalmist:
Be still and know that I am God
(Ps 46.10)

Absent prayer,
and we are –

whether we acknowledge it or not –
 our own god,
unavailable to the God
 who is there,
like Adam and Eve
 in the garden
 hiding from God.

Pausing to pray,
we acknowledge
and make time
for God's Spirit
to establish his
rightful claim upon us.

St Paul's pleasing God,
 loving God,
is practiced
above all, then,
in prayer.

*

What of his second
legitimate motive –
caring for others?

In his own,
so winsome words (vv. 7&8):
*...we were gentle among you,
like a nurse tenderly caring
for her own children.
So deeply do we care for you
that we are determined
to share with you
not only the gospel of God
but also our own selves,
because you have become
very dear to us.*

Yes..., St Paul
concludes our text,
giving his attention to love,
our love for one another.

He underlines
and emphasises
the importance
of such love.

Indeed,
it's pre-eminent
over all other
tasks and activities.

St Peter,
in one of his epistles
exhorts his readers to
*...maintain constant love
for one another.*
(1 Pt 4.8)

It's one thing
to love someone
when we happen
to feel so inclined,
to love because we
have been shown love,
or at least, benefitted
from someone's action
toward us.

But that's not at all
what St Paul
describes here as:
*...shar[ing] with you
not only the gospel of God
but also our own selves,
because you have become
very dear to us.*

Love is grounded in
deliberate cultivation
on our part –
morning by morning,
hour by hour –
of well-meaning
and generous
- thought,
- feeling,
- speech,
- and activity
in all our relationships.

Recall our Lord Jesus –
deeply grieved by reports
of John the Baptist's execution
retiring into the wilderness
in search of solitude and quiet –
only to be pursued
by crowds of people –
solitude and quiet
banished.

His response?

‘Go away’? ‘Leave me alone’?

Far from it.

St Matthew tells us:

*When he went ashore,
he saw a great crowd;
and he had compassion for them
and cured their sick.*
(Mt 14.14)

*

Enough!

I’ve immersed you –
I hope not drowned you –
in my reflections
on St Paul’s profound
and winsome text.

Let me close
with St Paul’s
prayerful exhortation
later in this same epistle:
*...may the Lord make you
increase and abound in love
for one another and for all,
just as we abound
in love for you.*
(1 Thess 3.12)