

Imitators and Influencers

Last week, the Queen's Birthday Honours List, recognising the achievements and service of people across Britain, was announced. A total of almost 1,500 honours make up the 2020 list, with 414 given to unsung heroes who responded to the Coronavirus pandemic. Hundreds of key workers - including nurses, delivery drivers, supermarket staff and volunteers - are among those who receive honours for their selfless and caring deeds.

As usual, there are also some famous faces. The 22 yr old England and Manchester United footballer, Marcus Rashford, was awarded an MBE, not for his services to football, but for his services to vulnerable children during the crisis. You'll remember that he was the young man who persuaded the government to extend the free school meal vouchers scheme in England throughout the summer after he penned an open letter to MPs, recalling his own experience of relying on free school meals and food banks as a boy in Wythenshawe. In the local press, Rashford was described as a '*great role model*' and '*a great credit to the area.*'

Gareth Thomas, The Wales and British Lions legend is another such role model. Awarded the MBE for services to sport and health, Thomas has been a trailblazer for gay sports stars and has spoken movingly of living with HIV. Drawing on his own experience of sharing the news of his HIV status, he's now the lead for Tackle HIV, a campaign to tackle stigma and misunderstanding around the virus. Speaking of his role in the campaign, he says that his life is now more about '*caring for people and wanting to create a better environment. I don't care about myself. I care much more that others are OK.*'

And one of the nation's favourite to receive an award is probably Mary Berry, who has become a Dame for services to Broadcasting, the Culinary Arts and charity. How many of us have been inspired by watching Mary Berry create something wonderful on TV, or enjoy her contribution to Bake Off? She may even have inspired *you* to try your hand at baking. If not, there's still time!

Our Bible passage from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is all about imitators and influencers – those who were part of an early Christian community in first century northern Greece, and who became role models to many believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia. A little about Paul's letter before we focus on our passage for today.

1 Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament and was written less than 20 years after the crucifixion and more than a decade before the first Gospel. It's a practical document written by Paul, Silas and Timothy to a community they had recently established. We read in Acts 17 that:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.'

Paul's letter however suggests that the community they established was entirely gentile, since we read that they '*turned to God from idols*'. Jewish Scripture isn't quoted, nor are issues of concern to Jewish Christians discussed, such as the Law, as they are in some of Paul's other letters. As we'll hear over the next few weeks, Paul's letter addresses the Thessalonian's concern that although Timothy had been back to see them, Paul hadn't yet returned to Thessalonica. This was despite their continuing suffering and the death of some of them before '*the day of the Lord*' and the coming again of Christ for which they were waiting. The letter is to be read aloud as the Thessalonians '*encourage one another and build up each other*'.

In our passage today, Paul begins his letter in his customary way, thanking God for all of them. He starts:

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.

What a wonderful letter this must have been to receive. Paul, the amazing apostle and founder of their community, writes to remind them that, not only does God love them very much, but has put his hand on them for something very special.

We read that the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – came to them, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. Paul, Silas and Timothy had lived among them, modelling what it was to be a follower of Christ, and we're told that the Thessalonians became

'imitators' of these Christian brothers and the Lord and, in spite of severe suffering, *'welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.'* We aren't told what this suffering entailed, just that they took the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.

But, it doesn't end there. Such was their response to receiving 'the word' and having Paul, Silas and Timothy live among them, *they* become a model to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia, part of the region of Western Greece. *'Do you know that all over the provinces believers look up to you?'* Paul tells them. *'The word has gotten round. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore – you're the message!'* he writes. Such was their enthusiasm for this word that they imitated Paul by sharing it and allowing others to receive it. And through their imitation and their witness, many more had come to faith.

The American poet and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: *'Your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.'* This statement can be read either positively or negatively; but whichever way it is taken it is a reminder of the importance of authenticity. Paul backed up his words by his actions, and his behaviour gave credibility to what he said. Paul was prepared to endure hardship, pain and deprivation for his faith. He suffered much. He doesn't spell out how the Thessalonians suffered, but he affirms their endurance.

At the end of a famous sermon, the Methodist preacher John Wesley urges his listeners to be full of faith and love; to do good, and suffer evil. In this way, he imitates Paul by his words, and encourages his listeners to do likewise by their actions. For many Christians, suffering is what other people endure. The top five countries where it's most dangerous to be a Christian are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Pakistan, and we need to continue praying for them. Yet, even millennial western Christians face challenges. Many gospel values are countercultural – but only if our actions speak loudly. Values such as commitment, faithfulness, constancy. Paul taught gospel values that were personified in Jesus. The challenge for us today is to embody those values in the lives we live outside the church – our everyday, ordinary lives, as well as our lives within the church.

I wonder who your Christian role models are, people who have influenced you at different times in your life. Mine is John - the vicar who baptised me and led

me to confirmation in my early 30s. He had such a gentle, easy way about him, and cared much more about others than he did himself. He always encouraged us to 'enjoy' our relationship with Jesus, and introduced the word 'enjoy' in the sending out prayer '*Go in peace to love, serve and ENJOY the Lord*' that you hear me say today. It's probably the only way of imitating him that I get right!

But, in thinking about who has influenced you, or who you might want to imitate, in what way might *we* be role models for others? As individuals, and collectively, like the Thessalonians, as a church? Or, more specifically, what are the characteristics we should display that will make people want to imitate us, remembering that our actions will always speak louder than our words? How might our faith be known in the places we spend most of our time, and in the communities around us?

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, our faith in Jesus is nothing if we keep it hidden.

Help us to put into practice what we learn when we are together.

Help us to take the message of Jesus beyond our walls.

In Jesus' name, Amen.