

St Paul was a great missionary who spread the gospel throughout the world that he knew. We know about his missionary work through the many letters he wrote to those young churches. It was a way of keeping in touch with them. He used the letters to challenge them when they were living lives that were contrary to the gospel but, more often, to encourage them as they struggled to make good decisions. Today's second reading is the beginning of his oldest letter, written to the Thessalonians.

He begins by telling them that he keeps them in his prayers. Then he offers them encouragement by telling them how he has observed their faith in action. He notes that they have worked for love and that they are persevering through hope. Faith, hope and love characterise their lives and the lives of all believers. These are God's gifts.

The basis of the Christian life is faith. Our Christian life began when we made the profession of faith at our baptism. But St Paul reminds us that the profession of faith was not just a formula of words. Words must lead to action. This is why the witness of believers should always be visible in the world around them. Action arising from faith can take many forms and embrace many activities both in our personal and family lives, but also in the broader society. Paul recognised the great variety of actions that demonstrate faith. But he also recognised what drove these actions; it was love. This should describe the way we live our faith in action: we work for love. Love can take many forms. Most obviously, it happens in family life, as husbands and wives love one another and as they teach their children to love. It happens as children love their parents. But it also happens when we live in the world with the sort of love that builds human dignity and builds peace. Paul's final virtue, hope, tells us a bit more about how we go about demonstrating faith and love: we do it with hope. Hope is the virtue that helps us to look to the future and to have the confidence to act. Hope enables us to persevere even when we are tempted to give up on people or situations.

The way Paul is describing the Christian life should remind us that it is not a life that is closed in on itself, or a life that shuts out the world. Rather, followers of Jesus are very much engaged in the world. However, there can be a challenge in getting the balance right between on the one hand, our faith influencing our engagement with the broader society and, on the other, the broader society influencing the way we live our faith. We can see the dominance of either

approach in different situations. Sometimes, people of faith can be accused of bringing too much faith to bear on the major social questions of the day. This type of accusation is usually made when Christian faith has a different view of these social questions than the one that prevails in the society. At other times, the influence of prevailing social attitudes can have a more powerful influence on people's attitudes and the way they live their lives than does the teaching of the gospel. This seems to be particularly the case today when there is not the social support for the gospel that there was in earlier times. Both scenarios are even more pronounced in societies like ours that have a secular social system.

Today the church is marking World Mission Sunday. This year it is a special year because it marks one hundred years since World Mission Sunday was established by Pope Pius XI. The purpose of World Mission Sunday has been to encourage people throughout the church to recognise that at its heart, the church is missionary. The purpose was to encourage people to pray for missionaries – those people who leave their homeland to take the gospel to new places. In his message for this anniversary, Pope Leo XIV notes that the annual marking of World Mission Sunday nurtured his vocation to be an Augustinian missionary and supported him as a missionary in Peru.

In many ways, all of us have benefitted from the work of missionaries. The gospel was first proclaimed in Australia by missionaries who came initially from England and Ireland. In places like Hong Kong and other parts of Asia missionary orders came from many parts of the world, including Europe, Canada, USA and Australia. One of the features of the times we live in is that those who first heard the gospel from missionary priests and religious sisters are now taking the gospel to places like Australia. Here in our archdiocese of Sydney, we have priests from Vietnam, China, India, various African countries, and parts of the Pacific. They are responding to the call that has been heard throughout history, to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. They follow in the footsteps of St Paul.

On this World Mission Sunday, let us pray for those who have left their homeland to take the gospel to other parts of the world. But let us also recognise the call each of us received at our baptism, to be witnesses to the Gospel of God in the world in which we lived. To be missionary is the essential vocation of the church. We, in our own way, in the ordinary circumstances of our lives, are part of that vocation.