

In The Beginning - Intolerance

Inspired by Haggai 1:14 - 2:9 and 2Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

I'm not sure what I was up to Friday, but I had the Safari search engine open on my computer. Up popped the typical posts of all sorts of news items. Most are irritating clips of repetitious mumbo jumbo that attempt to catch the reader's eye. Sometimes I scan them to see if there is a story of interest, or something for spirit sightings. And something did catch my eye.

The headline said, "Police tell Pastor bible verse on back of van could be hate speech." Interesting I thought. What's that all about. So, I clicked on the article and read further.

A 59-year-old pastor Mick Fleming was approached by a police officer while he was fueling up. The officer apparently did not confront the pastor, ticket or arrest him, but wanted to give him some advice. He apparently said, **"the writing could be seen as hate speech in the wrong context. I am just giving you a heads up".**¹ The bible verse was John 3:16, **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."** The officer commented further that if someone reported it, the police would investigate and Mick could end up in trouble.

Where did this crazy event take place, I wondered. Perhaps in Russia? Perhaps in the US given all that has been transpiring there of late? No. Where in the world would you think a bit of scripture on the back of a van could be seen as hateful? Well, Mick practices Street Ministry in Burnley Lancashire England! I was and still am, as my English cousin would say, "Gobsmacked." The UK? The seat of modern- day democracy? What's up with that? How is a bible verse considered hate speech?

It seems that Intolerance, an unwillingness to accept differing views or beliefs is reaching a new level.

There was fear breeding in the Thessalonian Church, there were rumours of apocalyptic times, times where angels and demons clash with one another and the universe hangs in the balance

Paul writes hoping to assuage fears. **"Now, friends, read these next words carefully. Slow down and don't go jumping to conclusions regarding the day when our Master, Jesus Christ, will come back and we assemble to welcome him. Don't let anyone shake you up or get you excited over some breathless report or rumored letter from me, that the day of the Master's arrival has come and gone. Don't fall for any line like that."**

Don't believe it Paul says. This is just a distraction, rumour sent among us to take us away from our task, chatter to take us away from our belief and work in Jesus Christ. So, friends, Paul says, **"take a firm stand, feet on the ground and head high. Keep a tight grip on what you were taught, whether in personal conversation or by our letter. May Jesus himself and God our Father, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech."** Take it easy Paul says. Don't give into gossip or innuendo.

The end of the world times have been prophesized for centuries. There was in fact a recent doomsday prediction just a few weeks ago. Paul wants his church not to be distracted by these misaligned prophecies and to "keep their eye on the ball," keep doing Jesus' ministry.

We believe in doing that as well, and we are trying very hard to serve in our ministry together. If I may boast a little, I would say we are doing ministry very well. Sometimes however our discipleship is frustrating and it feels like we are trying to push and elephant up a giant hill. There is just so much to do and so few of us. In addition, the news headlines we read, or news reports we hear are constantly

¹ [Police tell pastor bible verse on back of van could be "hate speech"](#), accessed November 7, 2025

disheartening, and we all get a little frustrated. Like the new church in Thessalonica, we might wonder what we are going to do? How might we continue this vital ministry we love so much in the future?

Well, the truthful answer is that we don't really know. I can however assure you that we are not about to experience an end to our world as we know it, through some apocalyptic means. That ancient myth is not God in the world. The reality is that the creation is in far more peril from human disrespect of the earth than from anything else. But that is another topic and a discussion for another time.

The eschatological end (the end of the world) that is spoken about by Paul is not what we face today. Paul indicated this was just gossip and he was right. But there is a real and present crisis that ever widens the gap to meaningful human relationships and threatens world harmony and peace. However, it is not being driven by God, but by our own actions. It begins with intolerance, a lack of respect for one another, stubbornness, an unwillingness to accept views, beliefs or behaviours that are different from our own.

It feels like intolerance is growing and its effects exacerbating conflicts throughout the world. These are not just conflicts manifest in wars, but in basic human relationships. Unless I'm mistaken, mistrust, lack of compassion, inflexibility, deceitfulness, reticence, hostility toward the other, ego and a sense of superiority, appear to be more prevalent all the time. In what world could the words **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life,"** be considered hate speech? If I put the fish symbol for being Christian on my bumper, am I going to be in some trouble? Am I going to have my vehicle vandalized? I never would have considered such a thing.

We see the painful evidence of these events everyday, even on our own streets. The denial of basic human and civil rights is alarming. The outcomes painful to witness and difficult to comprehend. Intolerance towards another is the root of a lot of evil.

Paul advised the early Christian Church not to listen to the fear mongering of an "end times" message. I don't believe we need fear that either. But I do believe we need to fear something else. We need to fear intolerance because it is cancerous in our communities and in the world. I believe our ministry asks us to listen intently to what is being shared at our local community events, in our restaurants and pubs, at our grocery stores, at our malls, in our schools and especially in our churches. And when disparaging, hateful, derogatory, inflammatory messages rise to the surface, we need to call them out. Because what begins with intolerance can end in hatred.

As Paul says, **"take a firm stand, feet on the ground and head high. Keep a tight grip on what you were taught."** Our way is peace loving and peace advocating. It is also justice seeking which is part of our vision here at PUC.

I mentioned that we don't know how our ministry might continue in the future. That is true but we can keep it vitally important and pastorally vigorous if we attend to our Jesus path. There was no room for intolerance in his ministry and there shouldn't be in ours either.

Thanks for listening this morning, Amen