

The Gospel According to St Paul

by Fr Peter Edmonds SJ

This talk on the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians was given to the Manchester and North Cheshire Circle on March 4th, 2013

Presuppositions

Thessalonica was founded in 315BC by Cassander, a general of Alexander the Great (356-323BC) who was determined to spread Hellenistic (and urban) civilisation throughout the world. Thessalonica was the name of Cassander's wife. The city became a Roman Province in 148BC, two hundred years before Paul's visit in 49AD.



While 1 Thessalonians is the earliest New Testament document (50/51AD), it was written by Paul some 15 years after he began his missionary work. His preferred missionary method was the personal visit to a community; if he were "stopped by Satan", possibly through an illness, he would send his representative. Now he tried a third means: a letter. Such letters were

common in secular commerce but up to that point they were unknown in the Christian mission. Paul adapted the form to his new purpose. A letter would bear some of the characteristics of a speech and reflect some of the skills of rhetoric. The letter was to be read out to the whole community. In the event the letter was a success; Paul himself would write more letters, even to a community that he had not visited, such as the Romans, and the form would be imitated by his disciples (Ephesians, Colossians and pastoral letters)¹.

The Evangelist

Paul wrote from Corinth where he spent eighteen months. The opening verse, and the frequent repetition of 'we' in the letter, reminds us that he did not write or work alone. He was at the head of a complex missionary enterprise. We know the names of forty of his helpers (the fullest list of these is in Romans 16; it includes both men and women). Hard though he worked (toiling "night and day") he knew that the force behind his apostolate was the grace of God. He uses three practically synonymous expressions to describe this in 1:5 – it is "power and the Holy Spirit and full conviction". This is a rhetorical device repeated in 2:10 (*His behaviour was holy, righteous and blameless*) and in 5:23 (*He prays for your spirit, soul and body*). The grace to which he owed his call (Galatians 1:15, 1 Corinthians 15:10) was still his support as he proclaimed Christ to the Gentiles. Luke hands on a tradition that he used as his base for his evangelising activities the workshop of Jason (Acts 17:5). In his autobiographical confession (2: 3-12) he defends his behaviour against those who saw no difference between him and other wandering teachers of the day; he was *no charlatan, a flatterer or lover of money*. His attitude was that of a nurse (one who gave the sick proper medicine) and of a father who took proper care of those entrusted to him. He addressed his converts as *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters); they were his beloved.

His *Evangel* (Gospel)

Paul's doctrinal teaching (*kerygma*) concerned:

- God who is 'Father', 'living and true' and 'faithful'. Truth would suggest for Paul the covenant virtues of *hesed* and *emet*, love and fidelity. Paul's Gospel was the 'gospel of God', a God who tests hearts. He is the God of peace.
- Jesus who is *Christ*, the Messiah of Jewish expectation and *Lord*, the one raised from the dead. *Lord*, *kurios*, was the title claimed by the Roman emperor; his subjects had to acknowledge him by confessing 'Caesar is Lord'. Especially emphasised is the imminent *parousia*, the future coming of Jesus.
- Traces of primitive confessions of faith are found in passages like:
- *They wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers from the wrath to come* (1:10-11)
- *We believe that Jesus died and rose again* (4:14)
- *Our Lord Jesus Christ died for us, so that whether we wait or sleep we might live with him* (5:10)
- His moral teaching (*didache*) includes a call to holiness; on two occasions this is the subject of his prayer:
- They were to be different from the society around them, particularly in their sexual behaviour (4:3-8).
- They were to win the respect of outsiders through their love of the brethren, their quiet lives and their hard work. In this they were the imitators of Paul himself.

Note especially the instructions of 5:16-22 (34 words in the Greek), representing the so-called 'shotgun theology', giving an easily-remembered recipe for Christian living.

The Evangelised

Already they are called a church, a word suggesting the *qahal* that Israel became for God in the desert as the elect people of God. As God's people they were chosen and beloved by God. Mainly of polytheistic, Gentile background they had embraced their new religion with enthusiasm. In his opening Paul compliments them on *their work of faith, labour of love, steadfastness of hope*; at its close he exhorts them to make *faith and love* their breastplate, and their helmet hope. They were full of joy (a gift of the last times), had imitated Paul and had themselves become examples to others. Like Paul himself they were full of missionary zeal.

But they endured affliction and tribulation (*thlipsis*): this may refer not only to the persecution they were suffering from their own countrymen but it may also be associated with the suspicion that went with being a strange sect. Was it the reaction felt by the newly-converted once the novelty had passed? Were they worried about the coming end? Were they overzealous in their enthusiasm to convert those around them and were they now suffering the consequences?

The Reason for the Letter

Paul sent Timothy to them "to establish you in the faith and to exhort you". He brought back news of their faith and love. But he may well have promised them a word from Paul. So Paul writes about four things:

- Their **sanctification** or holiness. The main problem seems to have been a loose

sexual morality. There may also be a reference to exploitation in business deals.

- **'love of the brethren'**. He simply says that God himself has taught them about this and he adds nothing of his own. It is a subject of his prayer.
- **'those who have fallen asleep'**, that is, those who had died. Would they miss out at the *parousia* of the Lord?
- **'the times and the seasons'**, that is, when will the *parousia* take place?

The reader has to strain out the *apocalyptic* language. This is familiar and recognisable for what it was at the time; it is used in Daniel and Revelation and in some two hundred other works not included in the Bible. But it is dangerous for us who tend to confuse the symbolic and the poetic with the reality. We are to recall our own belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus and our confidence in our destiny: "We shall always be with the Lord". God will lead them and us through a new Exodus into a new Promised Land. This is the source of our comfort. Like Jesus himself, Paul refuses to give any date. Let them rather *encourage one another and build one another up*. The Lord would come like a thief. Matthew repeats the same teaching: *You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour*. The day would be sudden, precarious and inevitable, as the prophets had written about the Day of the Lord. Meanwhile the people were to continue responding to the demands of Christian life.

The Account in the Acts

The only other source that we have for Paul's activity in Thessalonica is Luke. The chronology fits well; Paul had come from Philippi. Timothy came from Macedonia to Corinth where Paul would write the letter. We find a hint of how he might have supported himself in the workshop of Jason. There is reference to persecution by the Jews. But there are difficulties in reconciling Paul's own words with the account in the Acts, which was written so many years later.

- The content of Paul's preaching (*evangel*) resembles the standard Lucan message for a Jewish audience.
- The length of Paul's stay (three weeks) seems too short to establish the sort of relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians implied in Paul's own account.
- His audience appears to be primarily of Jewish background in contrast to the Gentile audience of the letter.

Appendix

We can imagine the scene as the letter is read out. We can put ourselves in the audience and analyse our reactions as we hear Paul speaking in his letter.

- His greeting reminds us that we are in the world of the Father and the Son; we have forgotten our idolatry
- His thanksgiving encourages us to persevere in the new life we have chosen
- We hear others talking about us in terms that we enjoy
- We are given Paul's own view of his mission, which will help us to defend him against the criticism of our former friends; we realise our good fortune in meeting Paul
- We realise how much we mean to him, that the visit of Timothy was a substitute for one of his own
- He is sufficiently concerned about us that he does something he has never done

before: he writes us a letter

- At last he has to challenge us about some backsliding in the matter of holiness and in our failure to love one another, and he knows all about our worries about our dead who we think will miss the coming of Christ
- His device of a prayer* helps us to remember his message
- He deals with our problem about our dead by recalling the fundamentals of our faith; he tells us to comfort and encourage one another
- Our holy kiss represents our reconciliation
- The experience of hearing his letter read aloud encourages us to live afresh our vocation as the “church” of Thessalonica

** Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you; and may the Lord make you increase in love to one another and to all, as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints (3: 11-13).*

¹ Although the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians are attributed to Paul in the Bible many scholars are doubtful that he really wrote them, or indeed the Second Letter to the Thessalonians. The Letter to the Hebrews, and several other letters, are not attributed to Paul in the Bible.

Spirituality Page

contributed by Eileen Cheverton

How sweet it is, out in the fields, at the end of the long summer afternoons! The sun is no longer raging at you, and the woods are beginning to throw long blue shadows over the stubble fields where the golden shocks are standing. The sky is cool, and you can see the pale half-moon smiling over the monastery in the distance. Perhaps a clean smell of pine comes down to you out of the woods, on the breeze, and mingles with the richness of the fields and of the harvest. And when the undermaster claps his hands for the end of work, you drop your arm and take off your hat to wipe the sweat out of your eyes. In the stillness you realise how the whole valley is alive with the singing of the crickets – a constant universal treble going up to God, rising like the incense of an evening prayer to the pure sky, *laus perennis!*

And you take your rosary out of your pocket and take your place in the long file, and start swinging homeward along the road with your boots ringing on the asphalt, and peace in your heart! And on your lips, silently, over and over again, the name of the Queen of Heaven, the Queen also of this valley: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...” And the Name of Her Son, for whom all this was made in the first place, for whom all this was planned and intended, for whom the whole of creation was framed, to be His Kingdom. “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus!”

“Full of Grace!” The very thought, over and over, fills our own hearts with more grace: and who knows what grace overflows into the world from that valley, from those rosaries, in the evenings when the monks are swinging home from work!

From *Elected Silence* by Thomas Merton