

Sermon for Sunday 18th October 2020

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Matthew 22:15-22

Paul and the Thessalonians

You have preached the Gospel, been attacked, arrested and imprisoned and forced out of a city. So what do you do? Well, if you are St Paul you move on to the next city, preach the gospel and wait to see if you are going to be attacked, arrested, imprisoned and forced out of that city too. I suspect that few, if any, of us here has faced that question, but many people in other parts of the world, especially China and parts of northern Nigeria, have faced the same question. And let us ask ourselves what would we do in such a situation?

When St Paul had arrived in Thessalonica he had just been attacked, arrested and imprisoned and forced out of the city of Philippi for preaching the Gospel there. He had not planned to be there at all. His plan had been to take the Gospel to Bithynia, the south shore of the Black Sea in modern day Turkey, but he had had a vision of a man of Macedonia telling him to come over to Macedonia and help them. St Paul had made his plans, but the Holy Spirit does not always work in according to his, or our, plans. In the words of Robert Burns, "The best laid plans o' mice an' men gang oft agley". How many churches have found, particularly this year, that their plans have been overtaken either, like St Paul, by God's instruction, or by rulings by the Government. And so St Paul had found himself, instead of in Bithynia, in Macedonia, firstly in Philippi and then in Thessalonica.

So Paul, arriving in Thessalonica after having had to leave Philippi, went, as was his custom in a new place, firstly to the synagogue in Thessalonica and preached from the Scriptures, as he did wherever he went, proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah who had had to suffer and then rise from the dead. We read in Acts that some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women joined Paul and Silas, Paul's co-worker. But a lot didn't. Some hostile Jews with some local ruffians started a riot against Paul and Silas, and not finding them, attacked a new believer called Jason in whose house Paul had been staying. The local magistrates then put Jason, Silas and St Paul on a sort of bail and let them go. The new Christians who had come to faith in Jesus through Paul's ministry then sent Paul and Silas away secretly at night to Berea where, after Paul had started preaching, news of this reached the hostile Jews in Thessalonica. These followed Paul and Silas to Berea; so Paul had to move on once again, this time to Athens, to wait for his friends to catch up with him. But back in Thessalonica, there was a small brand new church meeting in people's houses in the midst of a hostile group of both Jews and Greeks.

I wonder how many of you have been members of a new church congregation? Barbara and I have twice. Moving to Southampton we joined a church which met in a school before the Parish's church building was completed. Then moving on to Woking, we were again meeting in a school before completion of the parish's church building. What is different about a new church? It doesn't have members who keep looking back to the good old days; It has actively to evangelise to build a congregation; its new members do not have a strong Christian background and it does not have many members who grew up with background teaching on, or a background knowledge of, the Scriptures. And without adequate instruction and pastoral support some new members may fall by the wayside. And St Paul knew that. However, those who joined a new church in its very early days can have a parental feeling for it and take an interest in what it is doing and how it is faring. And St Paul felt that about the church in Thessalonica.

In his letter to the Philippians St Paul could write that he thanked God every time he remembered them, constantly praying with joy in every one of his prayers for all of them, because of their sharing in the gospel from when he first arrived there. I feel sure that what he prayed for the church in Philippi he also prayed for their Thessalonian near neighbours. And we should do similarly.

Arriving in Athens Paul, concerned about the new church in Thessalonica, from which he had so abruptly been forced to leave, sent Timothy to encourage them and see how they were faring. The Thessalonian Church must have been uplifted to realise that Paul had been so concerned about them that so very quickly he had sent Timothy to find out how they were. Paul, by now in Corinth, must have been delighted when Timothy returned to report how well they were doing, despite facing the continuing persecution. So shortly after Timothy had given his report, St Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church in the letter, the start of which was our New Testament reading. Perhaps we should ask ourselves how much we should be following St Paul and the Thessalonian church in encouraging and supporting one another by regularly keeping in touch with them and upholding those in authority in that church.

And what does Paul say? He gives thanks for them before God for what they are and what they do. And what do they do? Their works are rooted in their faith and steadfast hope in Jesus, having heard the good news of Jesus with joy in power and the Holy Spirit. Their hospitality to Paul and others was well known. Their reputation had spread throughout the church in Greece as they had put away their previous idolatry to wait for Jesus' return.

But what St Paul could specifically mention to the church in Corinth about the churches of Macedonia was their giving to God's work. While Paul was in Thessalonica he was supported by the new church in Philippi; the Thessalonians quickly followed suit and though themselves poor, gave generously towards the support of the even poorer church in Jerusalem. They, writes St Paul, gave as much as they were able and pleaded for the privilege of sharing in the service to the saints (God's people).

Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, encouraged all new congregations who had so very recently come to faith, to take on as quickly as possible full financial and other responsibility for fully supporting their pastor and the work of evangelism.

Our Gospel reading today tells of Jesus saying, "Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperors and to God the things that are God's." The Thessalonians had to pay to the Roman authorities the taxes laid down by law, as we do to HMRC, but the Thessalonians gave voluntarily and generously to support God's work in the life of the church. How many of us have pleaded for the privilege of sharing in service to the saints and then done it? And what would be the effect when we all did?

So as we prepare to lose both Sue and then Robin, all of us here as members of God's family should be prepared to support Shola during the interregnum as we begin to accept full responsibility for the financial and other responsibilities of the parish and the church worldwide..

Bill Birmingham