

## Reflection on the Third Sunday after Easter

David Fotheringham,

3 May 2020

### ***Read: Acts 17:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10***

The lectionary, the index of Bible readings we use week by week, has given us a very curious pair of passages for this week given that at the moment we couldn't go travelling to Thessalonica/Thessaloniki even if we tried; and the mobs that were stirred up there against Paul and Silas couldn't be imagined at the moment. For now, Thessalonica can only exist in dreams and postcards. But the reading does include the idea of keeping in touch in the face of being separated from loved ones – since we also have the letter written to give encouragement and love to the people of the church there after Paul and Silas had had to leave. Overall, the two readings together give examples of both good and bad human relations.

Before I come to that, though, I need to point out that a lot has happened between chapter 3 of Acts, where we were last Sunday, and chapter 17! It's a surprising jump in our lectionary list of readings, but in brief, here's what we missed:

Last week we had two disciples going for regular prayer at 3:00 in the afternoon, finding their attention drawn to a lame man along the way, to whom they offered healing in Jesus' name. We talked about the value of a habit of stopping for prayer, to keep us attuned to God's bigger kingdom, and to be listening for God's word of love for us and for the people God may be drawing to our attention. In the next few chapters of Acts the numbers of followers continues to grow, and some of them are charged with the responsibility of ensuring the care for the most vulnerable people in their midst. One of those people, Stephen, ended up being challenged for his witness to Jesus, and brought before the high priest. Stephen had a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God, but was convicted of blasphemy – which is a dangerous charge in any culture that wields it – and he was martyred. There was a young man by the name of Saul there, approving Stephen's death. That same feisty young Saul then went around ravaging the church, dragging men and women off to prison, until, on his way to persecute more followers of Jesus he had an encounter with Jesus in which he literally "saw the light" and became a convert. He went to Jerusalem, where the other followers were pretty wary of him at first, but over the next few years he ended up going on missionary journeys, preaching that Jesus was in fact the Messiah of God; that it was completely consistent with the Scriptures that he should suffer, and die, and be raised to *new* life, and that Jesus' way is the way to know life, indeed, in all of its fullness with God. And that's what we heard him doing today, on a visit to Thessalonica.

Paul is used to having varied responses to his preaching – after all, he used to oppose the message of Jesus – but he's more than willing to engage in the contest of ideas, of which there is plenty in the New Testament. But wherever the state is influenced by blasphemy

laws, violence flares. And in Thessalonica, Paul is accused by Jewish hard-liners of turning the world upside down and posing a threat to the stability of the state.

I don't know if any of you happened to watch Foreign Correspondent this week. I watched it at lunchtime on Friday with my 16 year old. It was a deeply disturbing story about Poland, where the church, which had been so helpful in standing for freedom with Lech Walensa and the Solidarity movement in the 70s and 80s, was portrayed as aligning with hard-line groups and proclaiming that the LGBTIQ minority are a threat to the society; with a lot of rather militant-looking nationalism. The idea of a mob gathering to throw out people with challenging ideas is not confined to the Biblical history.

So some of the worst of human behaviour, in mob violence, is on display during Paul's visit to Thessalonica. It's the kind of behaviour that in a way had been part of Paul's personal history, but now Paul himself is practicing a new way of behaving. He is courageous but respectful. And his letter to the Thessalonians emphasises that actually, "the medium is the message" – that the presentation of God's grace to us in Jesus may involve passion, but also respect and love. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, as we heard, "You are the message!" You proclaim the gospel in the way that you live, turning from the dead idols of your old lives to serving the living God looking towards God's kingdom breaking in; just as Paul had sought to live the message in his own following of Jesus' way. Later in the letter there is encouragement to be gentle, to demonstrate good conduct, to love and care for each other and for outsiders. Which leads me towards thinking about how we represent the message of God's redeeming love in Jesus.

We are in a kind of in-between time at the moment. It might still be some time away yet, but sooner or later restrictions will be eased. Things won't be the same. As a society we had become somewhat complacent, having a sense of invulnerability that came from a long period of relative stability and growth. We are being reminded of our own vulnerability; of the fact that we don't have all the control; the world is beautiful, dangerous, vulnerable, and mysterious, and we stamp around considering ourselves invulnerable and the environment under our own control at our own peril.

We are being reminded of the preciousness of community, and given a harsh taste of what it means to be isolated and separated; perhaps after this we will be more sensitive to those who have experienced separation from loved ones as refugees and asylum seekers.

We will also need to ask ourselves: how will we need to "be", to live, to connect, to be faithful to what God transforms in us and how God calls us to respond to others, so that our own lives echo and resonate with Jesus' word.

Last week we had the disciples practicing regular prayer, noticing people with needs, giving what they could. This week we have ended up with Paul and Silas separated from the church in Thessalonica, but using letters to communicate love and encouragement, and celebrating God's presence in the very lives of the people of faith there, even in the stresses they faced.

Prayer,  
noticing,  
communicating,  
caring,

- the primary stances of the first disciples and of us, as they and we listen for how to be God's people in a new situation.

Prayer,  
noticing,  
communicating,  
caring,

- to which, today, we will add receiving the signs of God's presence and life embodied as we break bread and drink the cup together.