

SERMON: 4 October 2015

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-12

BACKGROUND

Our reading this morning needs a lot of background to really understand its meaning.

In our reading, the Apostle Paul is defending his honour as an apostle sent by God, speaking with and by the Spirit of God. He is defending himself against anyone who is thinking that his mission as an apostle is doomed because of not only what happened in Philippi previously - but equally what was happening to him and his fellow missionaries in Thessalonica itself. He is using the language of his time in the way they criticized bad/false philosophers who were acting full of error, impurity, deceit (2:3), flattery (2:5), and love of honour (2:6) and money (2:5). In contrast, a Greek orator, writer, philosopher and historian of the Roman Empire in the 1st century, Dio Chrysostomus also observed that a true philosopher is gentle, like a nurse (2:7). Paul used all these words to make a very valid point that he is talking the truth. He did not speak on his own. He is speaking on behalf of the Almighty God.

So what happened in Philippi and Thessalonica.

Acts 16 gives us a good background of what the apostle Paul is referring to in our reading. When they went to Philippi, a leading city in Asia Minor at that time, they met a woman called Lydia. We know that she came to faith and that she was their contact to get into the city. But it seems that a lot of things then went completely wrong, especially when they changed the life a slave girl who used to help her owners make loads of money by fortune telling. When the apostle Paul took her gift away, her owners were rightfully angry and upset. I mean they lost their income.

We read in Acts 16 verses 19-24 that:

¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But eventually a miracle happened when a massive earthquake struck and all the doors opened and all the chains fell off.

Then we read in Acts 17 what happened in Thessalonica:

17 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." ⁴And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go."

So during the night Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica - I imagine for their own safety.

Paul makes the point that his mission to the Thessalonians was not "failure" despite all the conflict and hardship they endured. Paul emphasized the fact that the readers themselves must testify to his character. He wants the Thessalonians to be his defense witnesses. These witnesses, however, were not only responsible to witness to Paul's behaviour but also to copy Paul's behaviour as a servant of God. He encouraged the church to live as he had taught them to live, and they did. Paul says in verses 13-14:

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. ¹⁴For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews

Our reading supports Paul position that his mission "was not a failure" (*kenē*). *Kenos* refers to an activity that is without profit or without effect. In fact our reading just confirms that while all humans are so shortsighted, God knows and sees the bigger picture!

SERMON

The text verse for my reflection is verse 2: "We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition."

We all know what it is like to wear glasses. We all know how important it is to wear the RIGHT glasses for YOUR own needs. So let's have a wee experiment. All of you that have glasses please take them off and give them to the person next to you that does not wear glasses. Now I am sure that all of you, who do not need glasses, will have experienced quite a distorted, out of focus view of things around you! And I am sure we would giggle when I asked you to walk around with those glasses...in fact I do not think you would be able to walk at all without falling or bumping into something. And even those of you who have glasses, will also be able to confirm that for them to see they need the right prescription for THEIR eyes. And yes glasses are for YOUR OWN EYES ONLY!

I remember I once had a terrible optical experience. I collected my prescription glasses and tried them on. It seemed to be fine but oh my golly! - when I descended down some stairways it was a different story. When I looked down it felt as if the whole world is going to fall on me. When I took them back, the optician checked them out and said that he made a huge mistake. So I got new glasses and everything was fine! I was just glad I did not break a leg on those stairs!

Life is also in a way similar to wearing glasses. If you have distorted glasses, you are going to have a distorted view of everything. If you cannae see far and beyond, you have to wear glasses to help you see as far as possible. If you cannae see here and now, you have to wear glasses to help you see the important bits of everyday life here and now!

I guess how we approach life and its difficulties depends on which glasses we choose to put on!

Paul was often a prisoner and often been the subject of torture and hardship but he did not allow his circumstances to hinder him from proclaiming the good news. How could he possibly manage to stay focused and hopeful? Well, I think he decided to put on the right glasses in order for him to see the bigger picture, the picture that God has. I am sure he decided to put on the glasses of faith, where he could clearly see the impact of Jesus' redemption in the world.

When he looked through them, he could rejoice because he knew he was not alone. He could see the presence of the Lord all around him. He could clearly see that this life was not his end.

It could not have been easy for Paul but he did it because he was sure of Jesus' resurrection out of the grave. He was sure about the saving grace and love of Jesus for all humankind.

I guess we all lose hope sometime. We all lose focus at times. We all feel as if life is unfair. We all feel at times so sick and alone. We all have felt that everything I do is a failure. Yes and sometimes when other people have told us that we are a failure, we believe them. Sometimes we are even afraid to go out.

The Lord is telling you and me this morning to take off ALL the glasses that make us to see "short-sighted and distorted visions of reality". He wants me and you to put on glasses of faith so that we can see Him through His Holy Spirit surrounding us in all of our circumstances. Why? Because:

- Glasses of faith never steam up when trouble and hardship boils.
- Glasses of faith never get dirty when people are horrible and nasty.
- Glasses of faith never get lost when the waves of sorrow or the winds of strife sweep you off your feet.
- Glasses of faith will never crack when life throws its punches at you.
- Glasses of faith will always help you to see God in your life - no matter where you are!

God is telling us that with His help we can carry on despite our struggles, pain and despair. He is promising us that when we start to convey his message of love and mercy, we will never feel like a failure.

And if you do not have glasses of faith at all or if you decide not to wear them, well, do not moan when you fall or bump into all sorts of hazards or danger. Do not despair when you cannot SEE your way through life.

We all have a choice to make: we can go without glasses of faith through this life and get lost, or we can wear the glasses of faith where we will be able to SEE the bigger picture, we will be able to find our way through life with the help of God.

Paul and his friends wore their glasses of faith despite harassment, bullying, torture, imprisonment. They could survive, because God assured them of his presence.

What glasses do you have on most of the days? What glasses will you wear from now on?

I hope you will wear your glasses of faith with pride!

Amen