

“In power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”

A Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Our text today comes from the earliest, the oldest letter of Paul: 1 Thessalonians. This little letter is like other letters of Paul. In fact, there is a scholarly book on Paul which has put all the letters of Paul in parallel to each other, and then it takes each letter individually and shows where there are parallels in Paul's other letters.

This helps us see that Paul's letters have a certain structure that has a lot in common with each other as well as other letters of the day. We have thousands of papyri that are letters from that time. From that we can see that Paul follows a standard form for letters, and he adapts that form for his own use.

For example, he often starts out: “Grace and peace.” “Grace” is the way a Greek letter would begin, and “Peace” (Shalom) is the way a Hebrew letter would begin. Paul puts them together. There is nothing particularly significant about this. It's like saying: “Dear So-and-so.”

Then he addresses the reason or reasons he's writing and gives thanks for those to whom he is writing: “I thank God for you.” And then something about his travels, and then the main body of the letter, then greetings to other people, a doxology, and an Amen.

Of course, there's one big exception to this pattern—the letter to the Galatians.

That letter doesn't start with thanksgiving. He leaves that out. He's irritated, upset. He is saying to the Galatians: “What's wrong with you! You have left the truth of the gospel. How could you that?” In other words, “I can't be thankful.”

In contrast to that, in 1 Thessalonians, it's a very different story. The whole first chapter is mostly a thanksgiving: Thanks be to God. Thank you. Thanks, thanks, thanks. (At the end, in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, the note of thanksgiving echoes again.)

It's like what happens in the opera, *The Barber of Seville* (1816). There's one song in which two friends, part ways, a bass and a baritone, singing: “Good night.” One sings “Good night,” and the other one sings “Good night.” It goes on for more than five minutes. Finally, one of them stamps his foot and says: “Good night!” and exits the stage.

Paul is effusive like that, thanking the Lord and the Thessalonians. What had they done? We don't know for sure. He talks about how they have become Christians, how they are examples, and how they look for the coming of the Lord.

In other letters of Paul's, such as 2 Corinthians, he thanks the people who gave a collection for the poor (2 Cor 8:1). We know from sources (Josephus and others) that there was a famine in Jerusalem in 48 A.D. many of the Christians were of the lower class and were suffering, and Christians from elsewhere took up a collection for them. Paul mentions this several places, not although not directly here in 1 Thessalonians, but he may be inferring it. This letter was written about 50-51 A.D.

Our text for today, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, has a parallel in 1 Corinthians 1:4-9. This is striking because the situation in Corinth is so different from that in Thessalonica.

Corinth was one of the most crime-ridden and corrupt seaports of the ancient world. The congregation there was a mess. There were lots of problems: incest (chapter 5); prostitution and homosexuality (6); slavery and marrying outside the faith (7); eating food offered to idols (8-10); women having their heads covered and those who abuse the Lord's Supper (11); the gifts of the Spirit (speaking in tongues); denying the resurrection (15).

In contrast, in Thessalonica there are not those same problems. What is striking is that Paul's message to both is quite similar. It's not "the Thessalonians are such exemplary Christians" and "those Corinthians don't have it together." To the Thessalonians, he writes:

"May the God of peace sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

To the Corinthians, he writes:

"You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:7-9).

What we see here in terms of all the troubles is: Yes, there are troubles, but the Lord is taking care of them.

He writes to both of the power of God. To the Thessalonians, Paul writes: "... for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

To the Corinthians he writes that he was sent "to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Corinthians 1:17).

The gospel is the power of God, God coming in Jesus Christ and dying and rising for you and me. We say this in short form by saying: "The cross alone."

C. S. Lewis puts it this way: Either Jesus was crazy, a madman, or he was who he claimed to be. There's no place in between where you can say he was just a healer, or a teacher, or a prophet.

And that either/or, that starkness, helps us keep our bearings in this world where there is pervasive pressure to diminish Jesus.

One example. We see this diminishment in interfaith organizations on college and seminary campuses. Not all these programs are troublesome, but many are run by friendly, seemingly Westernized Muslims who talk positively about Jesus and claim that Muslims honor him. This disarms Christian young adults. But it's deceptive because in the Qur'an, Jesus becomes Isa, a Muslim prophet whose mission is to abolish all infidel religions, above all Christianity.

To the contrary, Christ is Lord and beside him there is no other. The gospel comes to us, as to the Thessalonians, "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

The gospel is the cross, and the cross is foolishness and a scandal, a double scandal. The first scandal is that the God who made everything, at a certain time and place became one of us and even died. That's the scandal of particularity.

And then the second scandal, which is even more impossible, the holy one of all took on sin and death and conquered it. Paul sums this up in 1 Corinthians. I'm going to put his words in our terms. He writes (paraphrase):

"Jews seek miracles and Greeks seek philosophy, but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal, an offense to the Jews and nonsense to the Greeks but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the wisdom of God is wiser than men and the power of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:22-25)

He is Lord and he claims you and me as his own as he claimed those long ago in Thessalonica and Corinth. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

"May the God of peace sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. **He who calls you** is faithful and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

And as he claimed those in Corinth. As Paul writes:

"You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, **by whom you were called** into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:7-9).

It is very much the same as he writes in Romans 8:30: "And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." [It is all in the past tense and there is a peculiar Greek tense here that is not past continuous but a state of being. It is done (aorist)].

What we find in Luther is an echo of Paul. Thus 1 Thessalonians 1:4: "For we know, brethren beloved by God, he has chosen you. . . ." is like Luther's Small Catechism:

"I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, and true faith."

That's a way of saying: chosen. Luther was not making stuff up. He was doing what Paul himself does. Putting it together and saying it in different ways.

What Paul has written to the Thessalonians about how the word has come to them "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction," he puts in yet another way in 2 Corinthians 3:17, a way that sheds light on what it's all about. He writes: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

Amen