

A postcard from Thessalonica. Acts 17:1-9

Greetings from Thessalonica! Actually, I've posted this from Berea whilst fleeing a riot. The gospel is certainly provoking reaction. On to Athens next. See you soon, Paul.

Receiving his latest postcard, we could be forgiven for thinking that Paul's travels so far have been a bit of a disaster. He's been expelled, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, from the Pisidian region, he's been stoned in Lystra, last week he'd been imprisoned in Philippi, and now here he is again having to escape under the cover of darkness from a riot.

As we hear about these happenings in each city- the opposition to the gospel, the physical danger that Paul and his companions keep finding themselves in, and now the latest developments in Thessalonica, we could very easily conclude that Paul's trips have been a bit of a disaster. It's natural to focus on the negative aspects that are recorded – the opposition, the agitators, here in Thessalonica in particular the riot, which must have been a particularly frightening event to witness. The grabbing of Jason and his being bound over to keep the peace.

But hang on a minute! Isn't this a case of looking at the glass and seeing that it is half empty rather than half full?

Has all the bad stuff that's been going on blinded us to what is really happening in the lives of many people in Thessalonica?

Maybe you've watched the film 'Toy Story'. If you don't have a clue what I'm on about, let me fill you in quickly. Andy is a boy with a much loved toy cowboy called Woody. Woody and his fellow toys come alive (with the help of sophisticated computer animation) when Andy isn't around.

Woody and the other toys live with one big fear, and that is that they will be replaced. Christmases and birthdays are days of horror for these toys.

The opening scene of Toy Story 1 is of toy soldiers spying on Andy's birthday party as he opens his presents. To the absolute horror of the toys they report back that Andy has received a large package that contains **the** must have toy of the year - a Buzz Lightyear space ranger. The toys are thrown into absolute panic, believing that this can only result in their downfall, and a whole host of bizarre events follow –as you would expect from *Disney* and a film where toys have complex emotions. All they can focus on is the negative event in their lives, the arrival of Buzz Lightyear. They are blind to everything else.

If we look again at what Luke writes of the events in Thessalonica, and we don't allow the riot to colour everything, make everything seem negative, then we're in for a pleasant surprise. The glass half full view is a refreshing one. We learn that Paul's preaching and teaching results in the conversion of some Jews, many God-fearing Greeks and more than a few of the prominent women of this sea port. We learn too from a letter that Paul writes to

the Thessalonian church not long after his visit, maybe even as soon as a couple of months later, (that we know as 1 Thessalonians) that the church is strong, the impact on the pagan world has been significant, and that the whole region knows there is something very different going on in Thessalonica amongst these followers of Jesus Christ.

So what does Paul do in Thessalonica to result in such a strong group of Christians so quickly? And to provoke such strong negative response too?

Well, pretty much what he's done in other places, as far as we can work out. He uses the scriptures (that's our Old Testament) to explain where Jesus fits in to God's plan. And if on this occasion he preaches in a similar way to that which we've come to expect, he follows the themes (as Ian said a couple of weeks ago) of Old testament history, then a demonstration of how the Old testament was really a preparation and the foundation of the ministry and mission of Jesus. Genesis 22, Isaiah 53, Psalm 22. He reminds them of their history, before moving on to the truths of the Gospel. But he doesn't just explain. Luke tells us too that he reasons and proves, which suggests conversation and debate as well as preaching. And he does this over three Saturdays in the synagogue. A kind of mini Alpha course of its day! And, as happens on Alpha courses, when the gospel is explained and conversation and debate take place and the Holy Spirit is invited to be present, conversions happen, lives are changed, a sense of excitement is generated and others pick up that something significant is happening.

But as usual, for every person that responds to the gospel message, there is another who is opposed. And it is Jews, we learn, who are jealous. It is Jews who oppose the message that Paul brings and set out to stir up the trouble that results in rioting. Other translations say 'righteously indignant' rather than jealous, which is probably closer to the meaning intended by Luke, and it makes more sense. The Jews were righteously indignant. Appalled at what they were hearing and the response being generated. Zealous in their approach, and not least because of who was doing the preaching and teaching.

And here is a reminder that Paul, not so many years previously, had done a massive about turn. By chapter 17 of Acts **we've** pretty much forgotten Paul's past because of all that has happened since – the preaching, the travelling, the converting, the church planting, acceptance from the apostles, etc. All that causes us to forget that Paul (or saul as he was) had been a devout Pharisee on a mission, a mission to destroy followers of Christ. Here in Thessalonica were zealous Jews, quite probably Pharisees, who found Paul's message abominable. And not least because it came from a fellow Pharisee. Someone who'd done the dirty, crossed to the other side. Politicians who 'cross the floor' are always in for abuse aren't they? Strongly held convictions of one sort or another that are let go in favour of the opposite are always hard to deal with. To dumb it down a bit its the equivalent if you're a Birmingham City fan of dressing in claret and blue and asking your mates to call you villain.

And what is the accusation levied at Paul and his companions?

That they have caused trouble all over the world, and they are defying Caesar's decrees, saying there is another king. One called Jesus.

I like Tom Wright's translation of this. He has the crowd say 'these are the people who have turned the world upside down'. The accusation is that Paul's message has 'turned the world upside down'. Wow! That's quite some accusation. And one I reckon Paul would be pretty pleased to be accused of! He might want to argue the toss that actually he was turning the world the right way up, but hey! What's 180 degrees between friends?

How many people would accuse us of turning the world upside down? Tilting it a little maybe. But turning it upside down? I'm not so sure. There's no doubt that for some people who we have contact with through the various ministries of Wade Street church, the world is tilting. As we reach into the community there are people hearing and debating and discovering that Jesus does literally turn your world upside down. For some of the people we are in contact with, the world is looking different, as they acquire a new perspective, where Jesus will one day be at the heart. And for work colleagues and friends and many others we have contact with on a daily basis we might well be helping their world to tilt towards Jesus. But how many people would accuse the Christians of Lichfield and the surrounding area of turning everything on its head, as they were accused in Thessalonica? Could Paul write to us with the words he wrote to the Thessalonian Christians:

'You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned from idols to serve the true and living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.'

As Paul prepares to move on again – next week writing to us from Athens- there are three things for us to note from his visit to Thessalonica:

First – Try to look at the glass half full, rather than half empty when working for the sake of the Gospel. Sure, there will be set backs and times when it all seems especially tough but if we look for the positives there will be blessings to see. Of course we could focus on the things we don't think are right here at Wade Street, but if the glass is half full couldn't we also rejoice and give thanks for the things that are?

Second - Keep on with the message of salvation. Paul preached and taught and explained and reasoned and argued, until it seems he was blue in the face. Always willing to start from the scriptures and plod through until he had placed Jesus in his rightful context. Not varying his message much, but teaching the truth over and over to anyone who would listen. Are we willing to do that?

And third – turn the world upside down.

And Paul might say to us as he does to the Thessalonian Christians:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, body and soul be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.