

21st Sunday after Pentecost 2023. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 *Receiving the Word*

We are spending another week with the apostle Paul, but this time in his letter to the Thessalonians. If Philippi was the church that filled Paul with the most joy, then the church in Thessalonica would have been a close second.

For the last few weeks the great theme has been imitating Christ in humble unity, being reconciled with each, resulting in the very peace of God protecting our hearts and minds.

This morning's reading shows what happens when this rich soil (united, humble, peace-filled) is seeded by the word of God. It's about what it means to 'receive the word,' i.e., the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This raises plenty of questions. Why do some people hear it but not 'receive it', whilst others receive it with joy and wonder? Do we all receive the word in the same way? Does it depend on what's going on in our life at the time?

A good place to begin to find these answers is to look at our own experience, but even that can be very complex.

When did we 'receive the word?' It's easy to get mixed up between what it means to merely hear the word (after all, nearly all the world has heard of Jesus and what his claims are) and receiving it.

What makes it possible for us to receive the word? What makes it difficult? What makes the difference? Or who makes the difference?

In today's reading, Paul writes to the little church in Thessalonica, 'and you became imitators of us and the Lord ... when you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers' (1 Thess 1:6-7).

There is so much in those two verses! Firstly, we receive the 'word' through and from others.

Today's reading tells the story of how the word was received by the Thessalonians. At a very basic level, the story is that Paul came to Thessalonica, (the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia), where he proclaimed the word of God among the Thessalonians, some of whom received it with joy.

In this simple version of the story, receiving the word places the emphasis on good preaching; we hear 'the word' proclaimed by a dynamic preacher and we respond. While it is true that many people have responded to 'the word' in this way, I find myself wondering if that is really all there is to it.

At a second, and I think a deeper reading, a more complex story emerges. For example, this is not just a story about Paul; it involves Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. This is reflected in Paul's

use of 'we' language throughout the letter. This immediately dispels the image of Paul the heroic mega-pastor/evangelist.

Indeed, Paul writes elsewhere (1 Corinthians 2:1-5), that he *didn't* preach with eloquence or even plausible words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Holy Spirit so that listeners would know this word does not come from him but the very power of God.

When we receive the 'word' it is often as the result of encounters with many individuals. Some of these encounters may have been brief and resulted simply in the planting of a seed of an idea, while other encounters have resulted in enduring relationships.

Regardless, every encounter is, in its own way, significant. Who were the people who have planted, watered, weeded, and tended the seed(s) that have led us to 'receive the word'?

Secondly, we receive the word through the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes in v.5 that 'our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction.' So the word comes from other people but with all the power of God the Holy Spirit.

These three things, *power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction*, are not separate, but related. In the letters of Paul, 'power' is associated almost always with God, not human beings; (e.g., Rom 1:20, 1 Cor 6:14, 12:10 among others)..

'The word' that we receive does not stand on its own; it is accompanied by the power of God which is manifested always in life-giving ways. In the New Testament God's power is only ever spoken of in relation to acts which result in life.

Anything that does not generate, or regenerate life is not from God. Often God will use someone or something else to help us see what we perhaps had not seen before.

Paul speaks constantly of the Spirit. The word Spirit also means breath. The breath of God literally gives us breath. The breath of God which first gave life to humankind is the Holy Spirit (Holy Breath) which renews our own spirit, setting us apart. Which in today's reading in v.4, Paul puts as being chosen by God, set apart by God for God. Holy for God.

This word received from the breath of God reminds us not only who we are, but *whose* we are. Paul writes in v.6 that with the confidence that this brings, we are filled with joy. The Holy Spirit confirms in our hearts and minds that what we have received is 'the word of God'.

It offers us assurance and thereby enables us to receive the 'word' with conviction, even when we encounter obstacles or doubts, or as Paul writes today '*in spite of persecution*' (1:6).

How do we know whether we have received the word? Thirdly, today's reading tells us we know we have received the word when we realise that *what we receive is not ours alone*. In

v.3 of today's reading, the 'receiving of the word' by the Thessalonians is proven or made evident, by their 'work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Just as the Holy Spirit confirms the 'receiving of the word' in us, so we demonstrate to others that we have 'received the word' through our work of faith and labour of love (1:7).

It can be tempting, when we 'receive the word', to think that we have received a special revelation, understood only by God and ourselves, and we allow this to become a justification for all we do and think. But the Holy Spirit moves in others as well as ourselves.

The community of faith, that is, the Church, becomes both a source of confirmation and correction. It can point out to us the idols we have not yet left behind or the ways in which we have created new ones. This is the way we grow as believers.

When I was ordained, a Bishop said to me, successful ministry is a series of events that keep us humble – showing all power and glory belong to God alone. Amen to that! We, in turn serve as a confirmation or a corrective to the community?

As we've spoken about for the last month, so Paul reminds us again today; that we human beings can only experience the fullness of our humanity when we are in deep, trusting relationship with one another.

This relationship has more depth when it is experienced along with God. This is the true power of the Church. When we receive the word, we become one with Christ. We are hidden in Christ who is in, and is God. We receive the word through a relationship with people we trust by the power of the Holy Spirit – the Lord, the giver of life! Let me pray...