

The thing you may have noticed about missionary journeys and pilgrimages, like any kind of travel, they don't always go to plan. My plan for covering this week's mileage certainly involved strolls around the old town of Basel, in Switzerland with time spent in museums and churches. What was not in the plan was the extra miles put in walking long concourses in airports I had not planned to visit. The weather changed my plans such that I enjoyed, if that is the right word, a scenic tour of northern European airports trying to get home in time to preach this sermon! Paul also often found his plans changed at short notice but it more often by angry crowds than by -10 C temps and snow.

So last week we heard about Paul, with his companion Silas, Timothy having apparently stayed behind in Philippi, Paul and Silas journey to Thessalonica where they preach in the local Synagogue. As in Philippi many respond to Paul's preaching, some Jews but also *many devout Gentiles (Acts 17.4)*, God-fearers as Lydia had been. A fledgling Christian church is soon established but after some weeks or months, the timetable is not clear, but after a time riots broke out against Paul's preaching and he departs for Berea.

As with the first Christian community in Neapoli we know very little about the Christian community established in Berea except that *The Jews here were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica: they received the message with great eagerness, studying the scriptures every day to see whether it was true. Many of them therefore became believers, and so did a fair number of gentiles, women of standing as well as men (Acts 17.11-22)*. The testament to Paul's success in Berea can be seen in two ways. The first is a plaza with splendid mosaics built on the supposed site of Paul's preaching. And the second is in the large number of Christian churches, mainly Byzantine in date which are proof of a strong Christian tradition in Berea. The physical evidence tells us something of Paul's success in establishing these early Christian churches with their unique mix of Jewish and Gentile converts but it is in his letters that we learn more about his preaching.

So let us back track to Thessalonica again, to look at the letter which Paul wrote to the community there. It is an important letter because it is the oldest writing in the New Testament.

We know something of the character of the church in Thessalonica from the letter which Paul wrote to them only a short while after he left. From the letter

itself, 1 Thessalonians, we learn that while he was in Athens Paul sent Timothy back to find out how the new community was fairing, a wise move given the level of opposition they had encountered there.

The letter possibly written from Athens but more likely from Corinth was written within months of Paul establishing the community. Paul in this letter is responding to the news of the Thessalonians which Timothy has brought him. Paul wants to maintain the relationship with this community of believers and like the much later letter to the Philippians it is full of gratitude and affection for them. He reminisces about his time with them and says that he longs to visit again. It seems likely that they were expecting him to return and he is relieved that they want to stay in touch and are still thinking well of him.

The text of this letter has had little impact on the theological thinking of the Church. Only snippets of it are included in the lectionary so it is not one we are very familiar with. Yet in this early letter we can see the beginnings of one of Paul's greatest theological ideas. Twice in this letter he refers to the famous threesome of *faith, hope and love* which we know best from the powerful letter, 1 Corinthians 13.

There is, however, one exception to the theological obscurity of 1 Thessalonians a passage at the same time the most quoted and most misinterpreted. It is important to our understanding that Paul and many if not most of his followers expected the second coming of Jesus within their own lifetime. They were wrong and it did not happen but it still provides an insight into the urgency of Paul's mission to preach as widely and as quickly as possible. This passage was written to a specific group of people, Christians in Thessalonica, to address a specific question about those who had died since Paul had been with them. It cannot have been many as he had only been gone a few months but they may have been martyrs caught up in the opposition to Paul and the message of the Christian faith.

13-14 *And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.*

15-18 *And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence—we have the Master's word on it—that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words.*

The emphasis on family in this passage reflects the tone of the whole letter that Christians should consider themselves as members of the same family with all that this involves. It also reflects Paul's care for his fledgling churches needing to reassure them on questions which were clearly causing them distress.

So far on our Pilgrimage we have seen Paul establish successful Christian communities which he saw as Christian families in Neapoli, Philippi, Thessalonika and Berea. But as with all best laid plans those pesky, troublemakers from Thessalonika turn up in Berea and Paul is on the move again. This time to the religious centre of Macedonia a journey of 15-20 days overland on foot or about a week by sea. Paul leaving his companions, Silas and Timothy in Berea, travels down river to the sea and sets sail for Athens.

I leave you with Paul's parting words for one of his Christian families, this one in Thessaloniki but I imagine he would have said the same of each of them.

What would be an adequate thanksgiving to offer God for all the joy we experience before him because of you? We do what we can, praying away, night and day, asking for the bonus of seeing your faces again and doing what we can to help when your faith falters.

11-13 *May God our Father himself and our Master Jesus clear the road to you! And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers.*