

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Advent Impact The First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? **10** Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. **11** Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. **12** And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. **13** And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Today is the beginning of the Church year, the First Sunday in Advent. "Advent" means "coming". It's the time when we focus on Jesus' coming as a baby in Bethlehem and on his coming at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. Part of Advent is putting ourselves in the mindset of people who lived before Christ was born. We sort of imagine that he hasn't come yet. That's why we sing "O come, O come Emmanuel" and read Jeremiah's prophecy that the Lord will cause "**a righteous Branch to spring up for David**". "**Branch**" is capitalized because it's a metaphor for the Lord Jesus Christ, descended as he is from King David.

But of course, Jesus Christ *has* come. When we sing "**O come, O come Emmanuel**" we are really reminding ourselves that God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, has come into human life and history, and that he will come a second time. By coming into this world, Jesus has made an indelible impact on human life and history. Jesus, crucified, resurrected and ascended to his Father, revealed himself through the preaching of the apostles to people

throughout the Roman empire, including the people in Thessalonica, to whom Paul wrote what was read this morning. In the two thousand years since, he has come to generation after generation of Christians over the whole sweep of history. And of course, Jesus has come to us. He has chosen us to be his people and revealed himself to us as God and Savior and Lord. This morning I'd like us to consider the impact Christ's coming had on the Thessalonian Christians, and in light of that, what impact his coming has on us.

Some background here might be helpful. Thessalonica was a major gentile city in the Roman Empire. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Like all Roman cities, a variety of gods, including the emperor, were worshiped. But there was a Jewish synagogue there as well.

At the beginning of Acts 17, Luke describes how Jesus came to Thessalonica through Paul's preaching. Paul and his companions preached in the synagogue for three days, and made a positive impact: some people, Jews as well as gentiles, came to Christ.

Jesus created a negative impact as well. Paul's preaching Jesus so alienated the Jewish religious establishment in Thessalonica that they recruited troublemakers to start a riot, protesting that Paul and his companions were **"acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus."** (Acts 17:7) Under cover of darkness, the believers had to rush Paul and Silas out of Thessalonica for their own protection.

Paul left behind him an infant church with only a rudimentary grasp of the gospel of Christ. He left them in an environment that was ruthlessly hostile to what they believed. We know that Paul was worried to death about them because of what he says just a few verses before the passage we just read. After their escape, Paul and his companions made their way to Athens. From there Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the disciples there were doing. Paul says in chapter 3, verse 5: **"When I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain."** Can you hear the anxiety in Paul's words?

But he goes on, **"But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us-- just as we long to see you. 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. 8 For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord."** (1 Thessalonians 3:6-8) Paul as much as says that

he and his companions wouldn't really be living if the Thessalonian Christians had fallen away. But they haven't! That's why the passage we read this morning is so full of Paul's emotion and gratitude to the Lord: **"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"**

Clearly the coming of Jesus to the Thessalonians made a deep impact on them. Why else would these people have become Christians in such a hostile environment? And why else would they have remained Christians, growing in love and devotion to Christ and to one another? I'd like to look at three dimensions of Christ's impact on them: the truth of the gospel, the love of God in the midst of suffering, and God's final judgment that will eliminate of all that causes suffering.

Paul preaches Jesus Christ, who said of himself, **"I am the way, the truth and the life."** (John 14:6) Most Roman gentiles were pagans. They worshiped a variety of gods and held a variety of beliefs on the way the world works and the purpose of human life. A few, including Paul's first gentile Thessalonian converts, were drawn to Judaism's one God. At the beginning of his letter, in verses 4 and 5 of the first chapter, Paul describes for the Thessalonians the impact he saw God make on them when he preached Jesus: **"For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."** As he proclaimed Christ, Paul *saw* people's lives change as the Holy Spirit brought Christ to them.

But Paul isn't the only one who has seen Jesus' impact on the Thessalonians. In his travels since leaving Thessalonica, he has heard about the Thessalonians from other Christians in Macedonia and Achaia. In verses 9 and 10 of chapter 1 he tells the Thessalonians the other congregations **"report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming."** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10) Jesus' impact on the Thessalonians wasn't just a message of moral reformation or comfort in adversity. It was the complete account of the truth of all reality. It was the revelation of the **"living and true God."** Jesus, the truth, had come to them! How could they turn away?

Second, they knew the **"living and true God"** that came to them is a holy and loving God. His love for sinners who have corrupted his own holy image in them has driven him to send his Son to die a criminal's death for them. They have violated his holiness but in Christ God took the judgment for that violation on himself. This is unfathomable. The gods of the Romans, the emperor, all others,

demanded to be satisfied and manipulated favors from their worshipers in order for them to approach him. But the **“true and living God”** come s to his enemies to give *himself* to *them*. The power of his love is evident in his raising Jesus to life and giving them his own life as he pours his Spirit out on them. His love is evident in guaranteeing to all who put their trust and faith in him that they will be rescued from the wrath to come, **“blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Thessalonians 3:13)**

It’s this love of God that drives the Thessalonians to care for one another in the face of opposition and persecution from those whose gods are idols or Jewish religious observance. Paul tells the Thessalonians, **“For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews.” 1 Thessalonians 2:14 (NRSV)** Jesus told his disciples in John 15:18, **“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.”** He was crucified by a world that preferred its own distortion over God’s truth, its own prerogatives over God’s love—and still does. The truth of the living God is his love that saves sinners and sustains them in their troubles and pain and adversity. How could they turn away?

Jesus had come to the Thessalonians and made an impact on them. But Paul’s message was also that Jesus will come again. He will return to judge humanity. Jesus had exposed the gods of this world, pagan or governmental or merely religious, as empty. He is the perfect human being set forth by by God as both the definition of what a human should be, and in his death on the cross, the savior of humans from the consequences of the sin that binds and enslaves humans as what we are—fallen and deformed versions of God’s highest creation.

Paul had taught the Thessalonians that this **“true and living God”**, whose love sought them out even from the cross, will ultimately extend his truth and love over the whole cosmos he has created. Jesus will come again. The impact his love and holiness and power made on the Thessalonians he will make complete for the whole creation. The Thessalonians had a reputation as people who **“wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”**

The truth of the gospel is that the world suffers because of its sin. Not just through its sins, but through its deep-seated wrongess and rebellion against the God who created it. But the truth of the gospel is also that God has come to us in that suffering in Christ to abolish it forever. This is the gospel’s impact that kept the Thessalonians faithful and made Paul and his companions overflow with joy as

Jesus came to them **“not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” (1 Thessalonians 1:5)**

As we enter Advent, I ask myself and all of us: like the Thessalonians, am I filled with joy contemplating God’s incredible love in sending the Savior of humanity to us **“in great humility?”** I ask myself and all of us, am I, like the Thessalonians eager to follow him and live for him who endured suffering and ridicule to die for me? Am I willing to allow his love and truth to strengthen and sustain me in the hard places? Am I willing to spend time pondering and turning over in my mind Christ’s greatness and love and truth so it crowds out the worthless distractions of the world? Will I allow them to penetrate my soul and govern my speech and my behavior? I ask myself and all of us, am I following him and obeying him expecting him to one day present me blameless before our God and Father at his coming? This is the impact of Christ’s coming. This is the impact of Advent.

Let us pray.