

The Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
<i>Response</i>	[A]scribe to the Lord glory and strength!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 1:1-5B
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[S]hine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 22:15-21

The twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A begins a new letter of St. Paul, and it's his first letter to the Thessalonians. It's a short letter. It's not very long—just five chapters, just a couple pages in the Bible. But like all Paul's letters, he doesn't need a lot of space to say a great deal.

So every year in Year A, the Church, from the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time through the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, it spends these five weeks looking at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. So in this video what I'm going to do is we'll look at the selection from the opening chapter of 1 Thessalonians, and then I'll just give you a little bit of background about the authorship, date, audience, and purpose of this particular letter of Paul. So we'll begin with the reading itself though. So today the Church does her normal practice with regard to the letter. It actually starts with the opening verses of the letter with 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5:

Paul, Silva'nus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalo'nians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; for our gospel came

to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.¹

Okay, so what can we make of this letter? The first thing you might want to note just in terms of authorship, as I've said elsewhere, this is one of the letters of Paul that's undisputed. In other words, modern scholars do not debate whether or not he wrote 1 Thessalonians. At the same time, it's interesting that it's another one of these letters of Paul in which he is not the sole author in the address of the letter. He actually describes it as a co-authored letter. So he'll do this sometimes with Timothy. In this case, it's Paul, Silva'nus, *and* Timothy...and Silva'nus is a form of the name Silas. You can see it sometimes as Silas, sometimes as Silva'nus, and Timothy—these are both companions of Paul that we read about in the book of Acts who traveled around with him, who were co-workers in his mission and his evangelization.

And in this case, the letter of 1 Thessalonians is written from them to the Church at Thessaloniki—we'll talk about that city in just a minute. It's usually regarded, interestingly though, as Paul's first letter. Now, as soon as I say that, let me just be clear. There is an enormous amount of scholarly debate about the date and the chronology of Paul's letters, like which letter comes first, which is second...which ones are written by Paul, which ones have disputed authorship, whether they were pseudonymous or not, deutero-Pauline—all kinds of arguments about the authorship, date, and chronology of Paul's letters. And that's a whole cottage industry in itself, so there's a lot of variables there, and there are a lot of factors that we don't have time to get into right now.

But just traditionally, this letter is usually dated to around 51 AD. So many scholars think it's not only the earliest of Paul's letters, but they think it's one of the earliest letters in the New Testament to be written—although, again, people debate that. So I don't want to hang my hat there necessarily, but just to give you a sense of its chronology, the traditional dating of the document puts it around the early 50s.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So remember, Paul is executed between 64 and 66 AD in Rome under Caesar Nero. So this would be about 15 years or so before his martyrdom. So this is early on in his missionary work, at the beginning of his literary activity of not only evangelizing churches but then beginning to write letters to churches that he has founded but which he is now separated from for some reason or another.

So if you look at the book of Acts, for example, as a kind of basic idea of the chronology of Paul's missionary activity, Paul in his first couple of missionary journeys...he's going around, he's preaching the Gospel...and it's all oral as far as we know. He's preaching the Gospel by word of mouth. But then once he begins to found different churches and then he has to go to other parts of the empire in his missionary efforts, he will begin writing letters to churches that he has already founded in order to check in on them, to encourage them, to exhort them, to warn them—like if they've been bad, like the Corinthians, that kind of thing.

So in this case, the traditional date of Thessalonians—the traditional idea about Thessalonians—is that Paul actually writes this letter to the Church at Thessaloniki while he's in the city of Corinth, where he had founded another church...and we have the letters to the Corinthians. And so in order to kind of just give you a little bit of background on this letter, it's very helpful to again read the book of Acts and see what it says to us about Paul's time in Thessaloniki. That's not what's going to tell us about what's going on at the time the letter is written, but it'll give us a background to the letter, because it gives us a little bit of an overview of Paul's time during Paul's time in the Church in that city, when he was founding it and beginning to preach the Gospel there.

So if you want to—as we're reading through the first letter of Thessalonians—if you want to get that background, go back and read Acts chapter 17. Acts 17 will give you a full picture—as much as we know—about Paul's first encounter with the people of Thessaloniki and his first preaching of the Gospel and how things went there before he left the city and then had to write the letter later when he was in a different town and place. So a couple words about Thessaloniki...unlike Philippi, we've talked about elsewhere, which was a Roman colony, Thessaloniki is a very Greek city. It's thoroughly, thoroughly Greek. It's actually named after

Alexander the Great's half sister. So the fact that it's named from such a famous Greek woman just gives you an idea of the Greek ethos, the Greek character of the city.

However, like Philippi and some of the other cities that we have Paul's letters to, it was not inhabited solely by pagans (by Greeks), but they were also Jews who lived in the city of Thessaloniki. And in fact, in Acts 17, it tells us there was a Jewish synagogue there. And of course, Paul's standard *modus operandi* when it comes to preaching the Gospel is...Romans 1:

...to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

So he'll always go to the city—to the synagogue in the city—before and preach the Gospel there. And then he'll turn to the Gentiles and go out from there. So in Thessaloniki, Paul's missionary efforts had some success with Jews, but was much more successful with the Gentiles, which is kind of *par* for the course with Paul. But what ends up happening is, some of the local Jews—when they hear his message—end up having him dragged before the authorities. And it's interesting, they accuse him of treason against the empire.

So listen to this, this is a little quote from Acts 17—just a little quote to give you a background of some of the persecution and opposition that Paul faced in this city of Thessaloniki that he's now going to write the letter to. So in Acts 17, this is the charge against Paul from some of his Jewish opponents in the city:

...“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

So notice what's going on; it's very interesting. The local Jewish authorities who aren't happy with Paul's preaching in the synagogue are bringing him before the Roman authorities under the charge of preaching another king than Caesar. So it's a fascinating charge, because we tend to think of Jesus as “my personal Lord and Savior”—we'll use that terminology in modern times to refer to Jesus. And of course that's correct, but it's easy for us to forget that by calling Jesus *mashiach*

(Anointed One), *christos* (the Anointed King), *kyrios* (the King who was also Lord)—those terms were politically charged in an imperial context where Rome had conquered Judea, had conquered the Jewish people and saw them as a subjugated people...so that any talk of a Jewish king would be seen as a threat to the Roman king.

We don't think of this sometimes, but the emperor is simply a king over many nations. So it has a royal status in the imperial context. So in this case, the Thessalonian Jewish opponents of Paul are charging him basically with treason against Caesar. And so Paul and Silas, his companions, are forced to flee from Thessaloniki to a city Beroea. And if you keep reading through Acts, you'll see that they do do that.

So Paul isn't in Thessaloniki very long. This is not like other cities, where Paul will spend a year or two preaching the Gospel, founding the Church, getting to know the people, establishing leaders, bishops, deacons, presbyters to govern the Church before departing and going to preach the Gospel somewhere else. In Thessaloniki, he's only there for a very brief time. He's able to convert some people to the practice of faith, but he ends up having to leave because of the persecution and opposition that he faces, and he goes to another town.

So after that happens, Paul later writes a letter to check in with the people of Thessaloniki to see how they're doing, and also to correct some errors and to deal with some pastoral issues—some pastoral problems—that they're having, many of which revolve around the issue of eschatology, teaching about the end. So as we're going to see in this letter in particular, most scholars agree (and I think this is right) that the heart of the letter is going to be in chapter 4, where Paul's going to deal with the issue of Christians/believers who die in Thessaloniki and about whom the Thessalonian Christians are worried that they won't be able to share in the resurrection because they died too soon. So there's an error in the Church at Thessaloniki about the second coming. They think that if you don't live until Christ comes back, then you won't be able to share in the glory of the resurrection if you died too soon.

So Paul writes 1 Thessalonians. He deals with several issues, but one of the main issues he's going to be dealing with in this letter is correcting the personal and general eschatology of the Thessalonian Christians and helping them understand the actual sequence of events—what happens to a person if they die now (they die soon) and also what's going to happen at the end of time when Jesus finally comes.

So this is a very important letter for Christian eschatology, which is one of my personal areas of interest—one of my personal areas of study. So I hope that you'll enjoy working through it together with me. It's also going to be...the famous text in 1 Thessalonians 4 is the passage that the American Protestant dispensationalist idea of the secret rapture...it's going to come from this letter of Paul. So let's pay close attention as we work through the letter to what Paul says about the Christian hope for the future. That's going to be a key theme in his first letter to the Thessalonians.

So with all that background in mind, let's just go back to the actual passage that the Church gives us today, and I want to highlight two key points about Paul's words. So you'll notice it opens there:

...To the church of the Thessalo'nians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Alright, so as you read those words, two things should leap out at you. First, notice that Paul—although this is arguably his first letter and he's writing it to a very young Christian congregation—he can already assume that they are familiar with

the three persons of the Trinity. Did you catch that as you were reading it? Notice he says:

...To the church of the Thessalo'nians in [number one] God the Father and [number two] the Lord Jesus Christ..

And if you skip down to the end, he says:

...in power and in the [number three] Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

So from the very earliest letter of Paul that we have, Paul's theology—his theology of the Gospel, his theology/doctrine of God—is Trinitarian. He's speaking about God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Now he doesn't articulate the full dogma of the Holy Trinity here. He's not going to get into the whole issue of nature and person and the relations between the persons and all that. But he's presuming a Trinitarian context—a Trinitarian content—to the Christian faith. And he's passing that on to the Thessalonians. So the reason that's important is...I just think it's really revealing because the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the mystery of the Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith. It's very telling that in this very brief letter, although Paul was only with the people of Thessaloniki for a short time, he obviously had taught them enough about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that he could begin his letter by just presuming that they would know what he was talking about when he referred to these three persons of the Trinity.

The second thing that's interesting about this text that you might have noticed is the theological virtues. Did you catch those? The traditional theological virtues are faith, hope, and love, and Paul mentions all three of these virtues in the opening line of his letter to the Thessalonians. So he says:

...remembering before our God and Father your work of faith [number one] and labor of love [number two]..

And then he goes on to say:

...and steadfastness of hope [number three] in our Lord Jesus Christ.

So those three virtues—faith, hope, and love—we really owe the prominence of those theological virtues to Paul. This is Paul’s distinctive contribution to Christian morality and Christian theology. Now most people are familiar with his articulation of this in 1 Corinthians 13, which is the famous love chapter.

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13)

That’s what most people are familiar with, but that articulation of those three virtues is already present in a less developed form in 1 Thessalonians. He’s presuming that when he talks about faith, when he talks about hope, when he talks about love, that these are going to be things that the Thessalonians are already familiar with.

So as you’ll see when we move through the letter, in particular, Paul is going to be exhorting the Thessalonians to the virtues of faith and hope, especially in the face of having experienced the death of some of their brothers and sisters in Christ and especially as having been converted from pagans—which there were a variety of views about the afterlife, many of which were rather, shall we say, *not* very hopeful—that he’s going to have to teach them how to trust, have faith in the coming of Christ, and also have hope in the resurrection of the dead. And we’ll see that as we move through the letter.