**Preaching the truth with pure motives** 30/7/23

Read: 2Corinthians 4, 1Thessalonians 2

Text: 1Thessalonians 2:1-6

Psalms: 27:1-4, 62:1-8, 18:23-30, 72old

The apostle Paul came to Thessalonica in AD 49 or 50. He was on his second missionary journey when the Lord called him to come over to Macedonia and he came to the city of Philippi. When he and Silas delivered a girl from demon-possession her masters were enraged and got Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison by the authorities. They were given no opportunity to defend themselves, even though they were Roman citizens. By the grace of God-by an earthquake in fact- Paul and Silas were released.

With scars on their backs, they moved on to the city of Thessalonica where they went into the synagogue to worship. Paul explained from the Bible that Messiah had to suffer and die, and be raised from the dead for our salvation (Acts 17:1-4). After just three Sabbath days many, especially God-fearing Gentiles, believed. But some Jews became jealous and started a riot outside the house where Paul was staying, but Paul was being ushered out of the city. No doubt the riot was very distressing to the new believers at Thessalonica, but, as Paul learnt before writing this letter, they had remained firm in their God-given faith (3:6).

The rioting Jews had gotten rid of Paul and Silas but they could not get rid of these new believers because they were locals. So the Jews set about undermining the faith of these new believers; they did this by trying to undermine the credibility of the apostle Paul. They made Paul out to be a charlatan, preaching a message of no substance for his own aggrandisement or profit. We know this because of what Paul writes to the believers here in this letter by way of defending himself and the gospel he preached. Paul later defended himself and his credibility to the Corinthian church saying, ‘We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus sake’ (2Cor 4:5).

In this letter Paul has just finished giving thanks to God for these believers, who he said were examples to believers all over Macedonia and Achaia. As new creations in Christ Jesus, these believers were living such changed lives, such morally upright lives, that everyone took note of them. So it could hardly be said that Paul’s preaching was in vain or was a failure (2:1). Yet Paul’s critics were trying to tell everyone that the gospel Paul preached was without substance and empty. Paul did not claim to be a great preacher of course (2Cor 11:6), but he recognised the power of the Holy Spirit in the word that he preached (1:5). In further defence of his ministry, Paul declares his motives to be pure and his methods above reproach.

**1. Men of courage, not cowards**

That Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica was not in vain was evident in the changed lives of the believers. But still his critics questioned his motives for coming to Thessalonica and preaching a message that ‘turned the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6). Critics of the Bible and the gospel of Jesus Christ are seldom consistent in their arguments; Paul’s preaching was a failure (2:1) yet before the authorities they claimed he was ‘turning the world upside down’. You will hear people say that science contradicts the Bible, or that scientists have proven it untrue, but when you ask them to show you in what way they are likely to reply, ‘Oh, everyone knows it’. Some may tell their own ideas about the origins of the universe and of life, but such ideas are not science.

Paul and Silas had come to Thessalonica from Philippi bearing the scars of persecution for preaching the gospel, and doing something good for a slave girl. The strong ‘but’ at the beginning of verse 2 argues against vain preaching or self-aggrandising preaching. Men preaching empty words, words that have no lasting impact on lives, and bring them no profit, are put off by persecution. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how he was ‘spitefully treated’ or insulted at Philippi, probably thinking of how the authorities ignored the fact that he was a Roman citizen. For the sake of the gospel, Paul made the authorities come and escort him for the city.

And so he came to Thessalonica. But far from being cowards and pulling back, Paul and Silas were, ‘bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of our God in much conflict’ (2:2). It may be that Paul’s accusers were criticising him for running away from Thessalonica, forgetting that they were rioting in the streets. One thing we learnt in India was to stay away from rioting mobs. Maybe the new believers were doubting Paul’s boldness but he assured them he was ready to suffer for the gospel of Jesus Christ, as he had done at Philippi. Paul knew the world would hate him for preaching the gospel because Jesus said this (John 15:18). He also knew how the other apostles had counted it an honour to suffer shame for Christ’s name (Acts 5:41). Opposition, often violent opposition from Jews or Gentiles, was no surprise to this gospel preacher.

**2.Motives pure**

Another accusation aimed at Paul and Silas was that of impure motives in their preaching. There was no shortage of charlatans peddling all sorts of philosophies and cults in those days, as seen down in Athens (Acts 17:21, 2Cor 2:17). Paul’s critics tried to lump him in with such men, accusing him of base and impure motives in his ministry. These charlatans rarely practiced what they preached, and in fact, preached what itching ears and lust-filled minds wanted to hear. Sexual morality was rarely part of their preaching. But it was for Paul and for the gospel he preached- even if this is not always understood today! Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how they had turned away from idols, from worship that involved religious prostitution. The gospel he preached and practiced did not come from or condone error or uncleanness (2:3). It was the pure word of God given him by the risen Jesus himself, and declared in the Holy Scriptures.

Paul vigorously denied any accusation that he deceived people in what he preached (2:3). ‘We have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully’ (2Cor 4:2). The word ‘deceit’ refers to the using of bait to catch fish; sometimes fishermen use a lure. Paul preached the whole counsel of God, leaving nothing out and adding nothing, for anyone (Acts 20:27). The gospel was the same for all people. It is a bit disturbing to see women’s Bibles and men’s Bibles in the bookshop these days. Sure we have Bibles in different languages but let no one adapt the Bible for a certain group of people! Paul pronounced a curse on anyone who preached another gospel (Gal 1:8). Tragically, some are tempted to leave out the very first step demanded in salvation, that of confession of sin and repentance or turning away from sin.

**3. Man approved by God**

When a person gets up to speak, we ask who he is and with what authority he speaks. If we proceed to listen, we judge the truthfulness of what he says. I have been approved by this church, by elders who prayerfully sought to discern my call by the Lord. You will also judge what I preach by the words of the Bible, as the Bereans did with Paul (Acts 17:10). Paul was not approved or sent by a church but by Christ himself, the risen Christ, who appeared to him on the Damascus road. Because Jesus is the Son of God he can write of being ‘approved by God’ (2:4).

When Paul was converted, and sent by Jesus to the Gentiles, he was given that gospel he would preach. He held this gospel in solemn trust from God. It was solemn because he knew he was answerable to God for what he preached, and how. God heard every word he preached and actually tested his heart (2:4). Men might accuse him of all sorts of motives but it was God who knew his heart and held him accountable to his divine commission. James says that teachers will receive a stricter judgment, and Paul would agree (James 3:1).

Paul was not interested in pleasing men but in pleasing God (2:4). He spoke the message given him Jesus, namely that Jesus is the Son of God, and promised Messiah. ‘If I still pleased men I would not be a bondservant or slave of Christ’ he wrote to the Galatians (Gal 1:10). Yes, Paul called himself a slave of Christ and as a slave did the will of his master, knowing that he was accountable to this master. He was not a slave to men even though he was humble in his preaching and did all he could to convince people of the truth. For myself I pray two things as I prepare a message: firstly, to be faithful to the word of God on which the message is based, and secondly, faithful to the people, that you might understand the message and accept the word of God. But your acceptance is not the measure of my ministry. It is disturbing when a congregation applauds the preacher - disturbing to the preacher and to God!

**4. Methods above reproach**

Paul continues defending his ministry in Thessalonica against various false accusations. He asks the believers to remember exactly what he preached and how he lived among them. A number of times he writes, ‘You know’ (2:1, 2, 5). And here in verse 5 he reminds them of three things he did not do, namely, uses flattering words, hide covetousness or a greedy attitude, or seek glory from men.

Firstly, flattering words. Because he was a God-pleaser and not a man-pleaser in his preaching, Paul did not need to flatter his listeners. He had the gospel given by God and this is what he preached: Jesus and him crucified, and him risen from the dead. It is a glorious gospel of salvation to those with ears to hear. Flattery is used by politicians and those preaching with the aim of getting riches or fame or both for themselves. There were many such preachers in Paul’s day and still today!

Paul did not target the emotions but the heart. Some preachers can stir the emotions and get people dancing in the isles or marching in the streets- usually following them. But Paul targeted the heart not the emotions; he looked for permanent change not just momentary excitement. To use flattery would be to detract from the power of the gospel itself, and the associated work of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, Paul was not preaching for selfish gain. He never used his preaching as a cover to get money from people. In fact, he did not ask for any support even though he had such a right (2:9). He did not preach as a pretext for greed- note marginal translation (2:5). Again, such preaching or lecturing was not uncommon. But it was not the case with Paul. The gospel was too precious to engage in any such ulterior motives or underhanded methods. Paul was compelled to preach this gospel, not for his own gain or glory but because of his divine commission, and for the glory of God. ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel’ he told the Corinthians (1Cor 9:16). Too many preachers think that the decision to preach the gospel, and where to preach, is theirs to make rather than God’s.

While solemnly calling upon God as his witness, Paul answered a third accusation, that of preaching for his own glory (2:6). Every person outside of Christ, every unbeliever, seeks glory for themselves in this world. They do so because this world is all they know and believe in. But as believers we have a Father in heaven and our aim in life and ministry is to please him, and glorify his holy name. Paul was a preacher not an entertainer. Men in the church must make this distinction. We strive to be interesting and persuasive but not to entertain. Paul was not asking for the Thessalonians to praise him but to give all thanks and praise to God. This is the way he began this letter, giving thanks and praise to God for their faith in Jesus Christ.

As Paul imitated Christ, so we are to imitate Paul, and the Lord (1:6, 1Cor 11:1). What Paul says in these verses is a challenge for all preachers of the gospel, but not only for preachers. In our worship and ministry within the church, let each one of us listen to the word preached and reflect upon what we hear.