

One of the more surprising entries on my CV - surprising to me, at least – is that I have an honorary degree from Aristotle University in Thessaloniki (i), and over the years I have paid many visits there. Thessaloniki is the second-largest city in Greece(ii), and has played an interesting part in my life, one way and another. But let me back-track a little to why I ended up with connections to that part of the world because the story is unusual.

For 16 years I ran a week-long residential teaching course in Oxford for postgraduate medics from around the world (everywhere from Australia to Peru, but mainly Europeans) who wanted to undertake research in diabetes. The course concentrated substantially on statistics and mathematics, but was highly interactive and involved all sorts of models and constructions – my trusty trunk was always in evidence from which to produce the next illustration. One graduate from Thessaloniki, Apostolos, became sufficiently interested in the teaching and excited by the environment that he wrote to me after the course asking if he could come and work with me in Oxford for a while – to which I readily agreed. Shortly after he arrived, I mentioned that there was a link to Thessaloniki in our family because my wife, Clare's, grandfather (Marcus Niebuhr Tod) had been based there for three years in the first world war as an intelligence officer of the British army. He was an Oxford Classics don and was fluent in both Greek and German. In 1917, he watched with horror from a hill above Thessaloniki when a Great Fire erupted destroying two thirds of the city and leaving more than 70,000 people homeless. The fire burned for 32 hours and destroyed 9,500 houses over a full square kilometre. Apostolos (and he sounds as though he should be out of the New Testament doesn't he?) was astounded to learn of this link. *His* grandfather had been a Greek intelligence officer in Thessaloniki at the same time. We think they must have met – who knows?

Well, Apostolos went on to set up a statistical research centre in Thessaloniki and I visited there every year to teach. On a couple of occasions after I had lectured, Clare and I travelled on to other parts of Greece including Philippi in Thrace. So when I read about Paul's second missionary journey in the Acts of the Apostles, Philippi and Thessaloniki are not just names, but places where I have walked among the old Roman remains, my steps covering the ground where Paul stood and preached. And why am I telling you all this? It's because we have to remember, always, that we stand in a direct line of Christian heritage from all those people that Paul met and talked to. The *real* people who felt then as 'modern' as you feel today.

The last time that Clare was asked to read from an epistle in Church she said, "yes, though I hope Paul's not being too obtuse". We tend to drift off in our heads during these readings – as you may have done a moment ago – thinking about lunch or taking another sip of our coffee or yawning while the reader struggles to make sense of some knotty theology from the letters of Paul. Yakety, yakety, yak. Yawn. (Where is Thessalonians in the New Testament anyway?) But I want to tell you now why I am excited by today's reading.

First a bit of context. Paul had a vision while in Troas. A man - and maybe he was called 'Apostolos', the name after all means 'emissary' - pleads with Paul to come to across to Macedonia of which Thessaloniki was far the largest city. "Come over to Macedonia and help us". So Paul sets out and gets to Philippi first (and has quite an adventure there!), then on to Thessaloniki. We read in Acts chapter 17 about his visit: *Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.* Then things turn a bit nasty and some jealous people reckon on stopping Paul, so

they start a riot, and rush round looking for Paul (who, with Silas is keeping well out of the way). The crowd get hold of Jason, his local host, and drag him before the magistrates, who get him to pay a bond and keep the peace. Then, at night, Paul and Silas scuttle off to Berea, a town pretty well due west from Thessaloniki and a bit north of Mount Olympus. And on foot – according to Google maps - it would take you about 15 hours... (I don't think Paul would have been using the app!)

So later, when Paul is down in Corinth, where he keeps himself in business during the working week with his old profession of tent-making, he sends Timothy back to the Thessalonians to see how they are doing and gets the thumbs up when Timothy returns. And then he writes a 'hurrah' letter to the Thessalonians.

And here are some of the wonderful things about the letter. Most scholars think it's the first letter that we have from Paul, written within 20 years of Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. So astonishingly what you have heard today is the very first documentation of our Christian faith, and the very first written declaration that Jesus died and rose again - for the Gospels and other letters were written later. And it celebrates that the Thessalonians have managed to keep going in their faith even though Paul had been with them for three or four weeks! It is a thank-you letter. It bubbles with enthusiasm. It is full of hope. It is full of encouragement. But it also speaks to us today. Wherever you are, whoever you are – this message is for you and for me.

In fact, not only has the message of our Lord thundered from your gathering into Macedonia and Achaia, but everywhere we go, your faith in God is talked about so we don't even have to say a thing! You see, they go on and on telling us the story of how you welcomed us when we were introduced to you; how you turned toward God and realigned your life to serve the one true living God.

And so, in these disturbing times of upheaval and of challenge, when it's easy to lose heart, we need to remember the Thessalonians of old and the Thessalonians now. 2000 years ago they managed to dodge the riots and establish a living faith in the face of all sorts of opposition and aggression. 100 years ago they saw their city burnt to ruins in a time of war, but rebuilt it better and healthier than it had been before. Today Apostolos, perhaps a descendant from those early Christians, continues medical care in Thessaloniki, and continues to publish (often with me as co-author) statistical meta-analyses of world-wide diabetes science. And the fingers of all this history stretch forwards and backwards, so that Pauls clarion call still rings down the centuries to us. Keep going despite the afflictions and opposition! Keep the faith! Encourage one another! Celebrate what we have and what we can become! Here, in *The Voice* translation is his message:

We always thank God for all of you in our prayers. Your actions on behalf of the true faith, your tireless toil of love, and your unfailing, unwavering, unending hope in our Lord Jesus have put you consistently at the forefront of our thoughts. O brothers and sisters loved by God, we know He has chosen you. And here is why: what you experienced in the good news we brought you was more than words funnelling into your ears; it came to you as a life-empowering, Spirit-infused message that offers complete hope and assurance!

May it do so for us, too, in our own unsettling times.

David Matthews. 18th October 2020