



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 6th 2015

✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠

The Bible lessons for Advent compel us to reflect upon who Jesus is and why he came into the world; and then to meditate on the implications all this holds for our future. Today's readings from the Epistles and Gospels deal with Jesus' teachings about his Second Coming and the Last Judgment, while those for the Daily Offices, on the other hand, deal with the people he calls to preach his Gospel.

The Prophet Amos declares in today's reading that a true prophet feels utterly compelled to prophesy. Those called by God to be his prophets have no choice but to proclaim his message whatever the consequences. "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (*Amos 3:8*)

Amos is glorying in his calling. But, on the other hand, Paul, in today's reading from his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, is desperately defending his ministry. It is a poignant passage – for in it we can see the great Apostle to the Gentiles compelled to defend himself to gentiles whom he, himself, had converted to Christianity.

But despite its poignancy, the passage ends on a note of triumph: "We thank God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." (*I Thess. 2:13*)

This statement – "When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God

" – raises a question that is as important for us today as it was for those newly-converted Macedonians 2000 years ago:

"How can we be sure what we hear from human lips is, indeed, the word of God? How can we be sure what we are hearing is not simply the eloquent and persuasively phrased thoughts of another human being?

How could those Macedonians have felt so certain about what they were hearing, when so many Christians today clearly feel so insecure about the message they are getting from their Churches?

Possible possibilities spring to mind. Could it be that the Macedonians simply weren't as sophisticated as we are today; that they were far more trusting; much more easily persuaded?

Actually, Thessalonica, their capital city, was big, rich and highly sophisticated. It was an important center of trade and communications – a major port on the trade route that linked Byzantium (later Constantinople) with the Adriatic. It might also be described as the Graeco-Roman equivalent of Baltimore, though at the time of Paul it was even more important to Macedonia than our city is to Maryland.

Thessalonica was both the economic and administrative capital of the province of Macedonia – in other words, Baltimore and Annapolis rolled into one. Beyond the automobile and electricity, there is very little that we have here today that Thessalonica didn't have.

It had theaters, stadiums, a red light district, traffic jams, running water, flush toilets, fancy homes, slums and scheming politicians. They were, moreover, just as well educated as we are and just worldly wise. The notion that they were much more gullible than we are won't wash.

It was, in fact, Paul's preaching that was the critical factor in the Thessalonian Christians' acceptance of the Gospel as the word of God. This was not because he enjoyed any special prestige or authority by virtue of his status as an Apostle. He makes it clear in his letter when he arrived in the city he had nothing of the sort.

When he and his companions arrived in the city, they had just been run out of another major Macedonian city, Philippi. They had been illegally subjected to brutal beatings and thrown into jail. Their lives had been saved solely because Paul was able to claim Roman citizenship.

Their appearance on arrival in Thessalonica would hardly have inspired confidence. What's more their reputations as troublemakers would certainly have preceded them. Seldom have missionaries had so little going for them.

It wasn't prestige and standing in the community that won for Paul the trust of the Thessalonians. Paul and his companions won their converts by the way in which they conducted themselves. Paul gives all credit to God, who, he writes, gave them the courage to proclaim the Gospel boldly, despite vociferous opposition.

They were frank, open and above board. They didn't use guile, or slick rhetoric to try to score debating points over the opposition. Nor did they use flattery or soften their message and make it more pleasing to their listeners. The only one they sought to please was God.

No less important, they lived the Gospel they preached – translating it into every area of their lives.

This was the crucial ingredient for their success; their credentials, if you will. Paul puts it this way: "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe."

Paul's message is that it is not enough simply to

preach the Gospel. It is absolutely vital for Christians to live by the precepts of the faith if they are to convince people they are preaching the word of God.

This doesn't mean Christians should be long-faced and mealy-mouthed. Nor does it mean they should repress all their natural emotions. It's hard to think of a writer more emotional than Paul. His letters are charged with more emotion per column inch than any other author I've encountered, ancient or modern. Nor is he lacking in humor – far from it. He has a sparkling dry wit.

Take his tongue-in-cheek admonition to the earnest Corinthians who were urging Christian men and women to live celibate lives like his own. "It is good for them if they abide even as I," he said, "But if they cannot contain, let them marry – for it is better to marry than to burn." By which, he means burn with lust.

The Comfortable Words encapsulate Gospel that we, like Paul, are commanded to preach: "So God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Paul's message is that we can't expect others to believe us if we, ourselves, don't put the Gospel into practice. We can't demand that others love their neighbors if we, ourselves, don't love. We can't expect others to believe God promises forgiveness to all who seek it, if we don't forgive those who offend us. We can't expect others to believe God is merciful if we don't show mercy.

It wasn't eloquence that persuaded the Thessalonians to believe they received God's word from Paul's lips, but not because of his eloquence. He was, as he confessed to the Corinthians: "Rude of speech." (*II Corinthians. 11:6*) They believed him because the Gospel shone forth in his life, transforming it and the lives of those around him. And it is this that enabled him to say: "When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.