

# The Year of St Paul 2008–2009

## The 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Thessalonians

Another reason why we constantly thank God for you is that as soon as you heard the message that we brought you as God's message, you accepted it for what it really is, God's message and not some human thinking; and it is still a living power among you who believe it.

1 Thessalonians 2:13



### The 1st letter to the Thessalonians in the Sunday Lectionary

The first letter comes at the end of Year A on Sundays 29–33.  
It's also read in the season of Advent.

**It's widely believed that Paul was the first New Testament author to get his thoughts on papyrus, long before the first gospel was written. This is therefore a fascinating document, because it's almost certainly the earliest surviving Christian writing – the first of Paul's letters.**

Why did Paul write letters?

Because he couldn't be everywhere, and his divine mission was to rush round the Mediterranean preaching about his beloved Lord Jesus, his death and Resurrection. Precisely as for us, so for Paul, a letter was the best substitute for his actual presence when problems arose in the churches that he had founded.

The Christians at Thessalonica were one of the first groups he'd gathered on his first arrival in Europe (the top end of Greece : see Acts 17). The city sat on the Via Egnatia, the important Roman road linking Greece to the Black Sea; it had an excellent harbour, so there'll have been a thoroughly multi-cultural community there. The letter implies that the Thessalonian Christians had converted from pagan worship rather than from Judaism (even though Acts speaks of Paul addressing the synagogue there). We can't tell what their social standing was. The Corinthian Christians evidently included people from all classes; but it's possible the Thessalonians were largely poor. Certainly they were (as Paul had warned them) experiencing persecution, and the letter is in part intended to comfort them in the face of this unpleasantness. Paul also wants to congratulate them for the way they accepted the gospel when he first preached to them; but more important, for Paul, with his desire to have Jesus known everywhere, is the fact that reports of their good behaviour have spread all over Greece.

Being Paul, he isn't reserved about reminding them how hard he'd worked when he was with them, and how tenderly he'd loved them.

Paul's co-worker Timothy has been to visit them too, to check how things were going, and he's brought back an excellent report.

Not that they can relax and put their feet up. Paul wants them to keep growing, and particularly to avoid sexual sin (something that Paul absolutely abhorred). This might have been particularly important to mention if they'd come from paganism rather than Judaism. Jewish education was quite clear about regarding sex as something too important to be indulged in outside the bounds of marriage; however the pagan attitude was largely that prevalent in Western Europe today, in that it really doesn't matter at all. It might be useful for us to reflect on whether our culture hasn't lost something important by trivialising sex in this way.

There is also the question of Jesus' return. His life, and particularly his Resurrection, meant for Paul that now we were in the end-time; Jesus would come back, at the moment when God would finally put everything to rights.

There seems, however, to have been a question at Thessalonica about those who died before Jesus' return. Had they missed out? Paul comforts the Thessalonians, in language drawn from Jewish apocalyptic, about the 'last trumpet' and the 'voice of the archangel'. This isn't supposed to be a timetable for the Second Coming, so much as an affirmation that God is indeed in charge, and a promise that things will be all right, including for those who are lately dead.

Paul explicitly refuses to talk about 'times and seasons'. The Thessalonian Christians have to keep going, to work hard, and to continue to respect the leaders of the church. In addition, they are to 'be at peace' and happy, and to allow the Spirit, that powerful element in the early Church's experience of God, to speak; they were to revere those who had the gift of prophecy.

It's a lovely letter: good to sit and read through from beginning to end.  
It won't take long!

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy;  
and may you all be kept safe and blameless,  
spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
God has called you and he will not fail.