



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 9th, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

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

The Prophet Amos tells us that a true prophet feels utterly compelled to prophesy. Those called by God to be his prophet 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, Paul, in today's passage from his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, is desperately defending his entire ministry. It is a poignant passage. Here we see the great Apostle to the Gentiles compelled to defend himself to gentiles who he, himself, had converted to Christianity.

But despite its poignancy, the passage ends on a note of triumph: "For this cause also 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." (*1 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's as important for us today as it was for those newly-converted

Macedonians 2000 years ago. How can we be sure that 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 internal combustion engine and electricity, there is very little that we have here 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 and also their reputation 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 the converts by how they conducted themselves. Paul gives all credit to God, who, he writes, gave them the courage to proclaim the Gospel boldly, despite the vociferous opposition they faced.

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.

Equally as important, they lived the Gospel they preached – translating it into every aspect of their lives. And this was clearly the crucial ingredient of their missionary endeavors; 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 their faith if they are to convince people that it is the word of God that they are preaching.

This doesn't mean that Christians have to be whey-faced and mealy-mouthed. It doesn't mean that Christians should repress all of their natural emotions. It's hard to think of any writer as emotional as 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 marvelous tongue-in-cheek admonition to the earnest Corinthians who were encouraging Christian men and women to live celibate lives like his own: "It is good for them if they abide even as I, but if they cannot contain, let them marry

– for it is better to marry than to burn." By that, 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 cannot expect others to believe us if we, ourselves, do not put the Gospel into practice. We can't demand others love if we, ourselves, do not love. We can't expect others to believe God promises them forgiveness, if we do not forgive those who offend us. We can't expect others to believe God is merciful if we do not show mercy.

The Thessalonians believed Paul when they received God's word from his 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.