

**PROCLAIMING THE WORD
IN MACEDONIA AND ACHAIA**

ACTS 15:36 - 18:18

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’

³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.

³⁹The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

Having settled the question of the freedom of the Gentiles not to have to obey the law of Moses, Luke turns his attention to Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, a mission that will take him to some of the principal cities bordering the Aegean. He returns to the communities in southern Galatia. He is then led to Greece, to the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, and then, after reporting back to Antioch, to Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia.

Paul’s desire is to return with Barnabas to ‘visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord’. The Greek *episkeptomai*, translated here as ‘visit’, recalls the ministry of *episkopē* given by Jesus to the apostles (see 1:20). However, he and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement, and Barnabas heads off for Cyprus with John Mark, his cousin (see Colossians 4:10). Luke tells us that Paul was unwilling to take John Mark because he had deserted them on their previous mission (see 13:13). It may also be that they had not yet resolved their differences after the disagreement recorded by Paul in Galatians 2:11-14 (see commentary on 14:28).

Paul chooses a new companion, Silas, one of the two leading members of the Jerusalem community who had delivered the decisions of the assembly to the church in Antioch (see 15:27). He leaves with the blessing of the Antioch church (see 13:3; 14:26), and heads north from Antioch, passing through northwest Syria, then east through Cilicia and the Taurus mountains to southern Galatia. He reaches Derbe in Lycaonia (see 14:20-21), and then Lystra (see 14:8-20) where he had been stoned. There he meets Timothy. Though Derbe and Lystra are in Lycaonia and Iconium is in Phrygia, Lystra is closer to Iconium, which accounts for Timothy being known in these two communities. Timothy's mother was a Jewish Christian, which means that Timothy was a Jew. His father, however, was Greek, and Timothy had not been circumcised.

Whatever Paul's ideas were concerning the necessity of abiding by Jewish food laws when sharing table fellowship with Gentiles, he was proud of his Judaism. He was also, as we have seen, determined to be faithful to the mission given by God to the Jews. They were to be God's instrument in taking to the Gentiles the blessings promised to Abraham. In choosing Timothy as a companion, he saw to his being circumcised (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-22). With a Jewish mother and a Greek father, Timothy would be a perfect model of a faithful observant Jew taking the good news of God's grace to the nations. Paul and Silas took with them from Jerusalem the good news that Gentiles do not have to obey the law of Moses. As well they were armed with clear instructions as to how Gentiles could share table fellowship with Jews in ways that would not cause offence but would foster harmonious communion.

For the last time, Luke mentions the apostles. He has established the fact that Paul's mission is an extension of theirs and has been approved by them. He can leave the church in Jerusalem now, and concentrate on the extension of the church into Europe and Asia and 'to the ends of the earth' (1:8). Again he speaks of the growth of the church – a sign of the action of the Holy Spirit and so of God's blessing. This time he highlights faith, for it is their adherence to the risen Jesus that is the bond that holds them in communion as a church.

⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.

⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

¹Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek.

²He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium.

³Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

⁴As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

Map 4 : Missionary journey from Antioch to Troas



Paul's plan seems to have been to head west to the Roman province of Asia. However, under instructions from the Spirit of Jesus he heads north, passing through eastern Phrygia, the region of Phrygia incorporated by Rome into the province of Galatia. This includes the cities of Iconium and Antioch, visited by Paul two years earlier.

Paul then plans to head northwest to Bithynia on the southern shore of the Black Sea. However, he is directed west by 'the Spirit of Jesus', and passing by way of Mysia, south of the Hellespont, he arrives at Troas. Verses six to eight cover a journey of about fifteen hundred kilometres, and would have taken from six to eight months. Luke has only one thing in mind: to highlight the fact that Paul is acting under the guidance of the Spirit of the risen Jesus. At Troas Paul has a vision. He is being called to Macedonia 'to proclaim the good news to them'. Throughout the journey Jesus has been guiding the mission. The goal now becomes clear. They are being drawn to Europe.

At this crucial point, suddenly the text moves into the first person. 'We' tried to cross. God was calling 'us'. as explained in the Introduction, some scholars interpret this as an indication that the author is introducing one of his sources. There is no persuasive reason, however, against accepting this as Luke's own personal witness, introduced unobtrusively into his narrative.

⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them;

⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'

¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,

¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

¹³On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

¹⁵When she and her household were baptised, she urged us, saying,

'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

The narrative continues in the first person (see 16:10). After an overnight stop at the island of Samothrace, they reach the Macedonian port of Neapolis. Here they join the via Egnatia, a Roman road which stretched over a thousand kilometres crossing Macedonia from the Adriatic in the west to the Bosphorus. Fifteen kilometres along this road they come to the Roman colony of Philippi.

Philippi had been reconstructed by Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, in 356BC. It held a strategically important position, guarding a mountain pass on the overland trade route between Europe and Asia. In 168BC it was incorporated into the Roman Empire. In 42BC it was the scene of the victory of Antony and Octavian (who was to become the emperor Augustus) over Brutus and Cassius, and was established as a Roman colony, where members of the victorious army could retire with all the rights of Roman citizens. It was in the chief of the four districts into which Macedonia was divided and was a Roman city with Latin as the official language. There were some Jews there, but not enough, it seems, for a synagogue. Though Amphipolis was the capital of the district in Macedonia to which Philippi belonged, Philippi could still be called 'a leading city of the district'.

Among those who have gathered for prayer by the Gangites, a small river which flows by the walls of the city, is a Gentile woman who is attracted to Judaism. She comes from Lydia in Asia Minor, from the city of Thyatira, one of the seven cities of the Apocalypse (see Revelation 2:18-29). The city was famous for its purple dye, made from the madder root rather than the marine murex. She and her household are baptised – the first fruits of the European harvest. The missionaries accept her hospitality and a special relationship begins between Paul and Philippi. This can be seen from his letter written to the Christian community there, possibly in the latter part of his Roman detention (see Philippians 4:15-19).

Map 5 : In Macedonia and Achaia



¹⁶One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.'

¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

In this first encounter with a Roman city, Luke focuses on the liberating power of the word. A girl with extraordinary intuitive powers has been enslaved for commercial gain. She sees the missionaries for what they are and, in a form of trance, announces it to all and sundry. Jesus was acknowledged in similar fashion (see Luke 4:41). Paul, like Jesus, liberates the girl from her psychological (and commercial) captivity. It is not enough that what she cries out is true. The truth is to be proclaimed by witnesses who are inspired by the Holy Spirit and who live the truth which they proclaim.

Rome prided itself on the power which it wielded to bring about peace and liberation. Jesus was offered power by Satan. He refused it, for power to save comes only from God (see Luke 4:5-8). The freedom brought by the word is freedom from sin (see Luke 11:4), freedom from all that would place an obstacle between a human being or a human institution and divine grace.

The owners of the slave girl recognise Paul and his companions as Jews. According to Roman law, Jews were free to practice Judaism, but not to attempt to win converts. The accusation levelled against the missionaries is that they 'are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe'. The Roman claim was to bring peace to those who acted according to justice – meaning according to Roman law. The word proclaimed by the missionaries is a challenge to them. True peace comes from true justice, not from a system which benefits some by enslaving others.

The magistrates, given their correct title *stratēgoi* by Luke, order them to be 'beaten with rods' - a characteristic Roman punishment (see 2Corinthians 11:25). Peter and John were imprisoned (see 4:3) because they were seen as a challenge to the power of the Jewish authorities. Paul is challenging the Roman authorities to be concerned with real freedom.

In a letter to the Thessalonians Paul speaks of his stay in Philippi, and of his having been ‘shamefully mistreated’ there (1Thessalonians 2:2). Their feet are ‘fastened in stocks’, but their praise of God cannot be chained and is witnessed by the other prisoners. Suddenly the foundations of the prison are shaken, as was the room in which the Jerusalem community was praying (see 4:31). The doors of the prison are opened, as they were for the apostles (see 5:19) and for Peter (see 12:10). *Everyone’s* chains are unfastened. The slave girl has just been freed from her prison. Now the prisoners stand as a symbol of what the risen Jesus will do in city after city throughout the Roman world.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

– Luke 1:78-79

Saved by Paul, the gaoler senses the presence and power of God. He falls at Paul’s feet, as Peter had fallen at the feet of Jesus on the occasion of the miraculous catch of fish (see Luke 5:8). His question echoes that of the crowd to John the Baptist (see Luke 3:10), or the people to Peter on the day of Pentecost (see 2:37). In the vision, the Macedonian had pleaded with Paul to come in response to their cry (see 16:9). The slave girl had recognised them as being ‘slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation’ (16:17). It is a paradox: freedom and salvation come through one who is a ‘slave of Christ’ (Philippians 1:1), a ‘prisoner of Christ’ (Ephesians 3:1).

In a summary of the essence of the catechesis given by the missionaries to the Gentiles, the gaoler is told to ‘believe in the Lord Jesus’ (compare 11:17). His repentance is shown by his cleansing their wounds. He is baptised and they share a meal, and the joy of the Holy Spirit (compare Luke 10:21).

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened.

²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’

²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’

³¹They answered, ‘Believe on [in] the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptised without delay.

³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

³⁵When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, 'Let those men go.' ³⁶And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.'

³⁷But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.'

³⁸The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; ³⁹so they came and apologised to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.

⁴⁰After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

¹After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

Moved by superstition because of the earthquake, or perhaps by a guilty conscience at their lack of due process, the magistrates send the police with instructions to have the prisoners released. These 'police' (Greek: *rabdouchoi*) were attendants to the colonial magistrates, and were responsible, among other matters, for administering floggings. Luke's attention to such details is impressive.

Paul insists that the truth of the matter be on the public record. The missionaries have been accused of advocating behaviour that is against Roman law (see 16:21). Paul sees it as important at the beginning of this mission into the Roman world, that it be abundantly clear that those who have acted against the law are not the missionaries, but the magistrates themselves. Civil authority should be exercised in such a way as to bring about true justice and real freedom.

Luke seems to have stayed on in Philippi, for the narrative, at this point, moves back to the third person: '*they*' departed.

Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, is about one hundred fifty kilometres west of Philippi along the via Egnatia. The travellers would have broken their journey at Amphipolis and Appollonia. Thessalonica was the seat of the Roman proconsul of Macedonia and an important centre for the cult of the Roman deities and of the Emperor. There was also a large Jewish community

Luke has given us an example of Paul's synagogue preaching when describing his mission to Antioch in Pisidia (see 13:16-41). Here he summarises the main themes. Paul speaks of the Messiah as a suffering servant (see commentary on 3:13); he identifies the Messiah as Jesus; and he refers to himself as his ambassador. In referring to himself, he is referring to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in his ministry.

Luke speaks of three groups who 'joined' Paul and Silas. The word translated 'joined' here is the passive of the Greek: *prosklēroō*. God has chosen them to enjoy the promised inheritance. There were 'some' Jews. There were also 'a great many of the devout Greeks'. Luke is referring to those Gentiles who attended the synagogue, though they did not have themselves circumcised. They were attracted to Judaism for its monotheistic faith, and also because, in a world of confusing and conflicting religious and philosophical ideas, there were those who found attractive the clarity of Judaism's moral code. A third group consists in 'not a few of the leading women'. Christians met in a home to break bread. It was especially these rich women who were able to provide hospitality to the community.

Once again (see 13:45), jealousy leads to aggression. Thessalonica is a free city. The mob, therefore, intend to haul Paul and Silas before the assembly of citizens (Geek: *dēmos*). The accusations made against the missionaries remind us of those levelled against Jesus (see Luke 23:2,5). The city authorities, given their correct title (*politarchēs*) by Luke, are disturbed and it seems that Jason had to go guarantor that Paul would stay away. Is this what Paul is referring to in 1 Thessalonians 2:14,18, when he speaks of Satan blocking him from coming back to see the Thessalonians? Paul's letters to the community written from Corinth some months later would seem to imply a stay of a few months,

²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.' ⁴Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

⁵But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house.

⁶When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, ⁷and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.'

⁸The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, ⁹and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

¹⁰That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the Scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. ¹²Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. ¹³But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. ¹⁴Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. ¹⁵Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

In the letter which Paul wrote back to the Christian community in Thessalonica within a year of his forced departure, he speaks of the 'great opposition' which he experienced there (see 1Thessalonians 2:2). He speaks also of the suffering experienced by the new converts especially from the Jewish opposition:

You became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.

– 1Thessalonians 2:14-16

The opposition is so determined and the danger so great that the local converts organise for Paul and Silas to leave by night. They continue in a westerly direction, but abandon the Via Egnatia and travel the sixty or so kilometres into the hills to Beroea. There they are given a much warmer and more open reception than in Thessalonica. However, when the opposition in Thessalonica finds out where they are, they come to Beroea to stir up trouble. Silas and Timothy remain behind, but Paul is escorted east to the coast and then south by boat to Athens. His escort then returns to Beroea with instructions from Paul that Silas and Timothy are to rejoin him.

From Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, we learn that Paul was keen to go back to Thessalonica but that 'Satan' prevented him (see 1Thessalonians 2:18). He is referring presumably to the hatred of the Jewish opposition in Thessalonica which forced him to change his plans and head south. We learn also that his instructions to Timothy were to return to Thessalonica before joining up again with Paul:

We decided to be left alone in Athens; and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.

– 1Thessalonians 3:1-3

Athens saw itself as the cultural centre of the Greek-speaking world. At the time of Paul's visit, it had lost any semblance of its former military and economic power, but, at about the time of Paul's visit, it was given a special status in Roman law as a *civitas foederata*, a city allied to Rome. This made it independent of the jurisdiction of the proconsul of Achaia who resided in Corinth.

In Macedonia we witnessed Paul on a mission of liberation from the limitations and the abuse of Roman power, and from intransigent Jewish ideology. In Athens Paul moves from the synagogue into the marketplace (the *agora*) and into the arena of public debate and philosophical dispute (the *Areopagus*). We witness the meeting of the word and Greek wisdom, represented by the Epicureans and the Stoics. Paul was no stranger to this world. One of the leading Stoic schools in the east was at Tarsus, and Paul's letters reveal a man who is familiar with its thought.

Paul's proclamation 'about Jesus and the resurrection' earns for him what is characteristically Athenian slang. They call him a 'babbler' (Greek: *spermologos*). Others think that he is introducing yet another foreign divinity. They take him for judgment before the council named after the nearby hill dedicated to Ares. We know from other sources that Athens was renowned for the number of statues of gods that adorned the public places. The philosophers had no argument with this but neither did they take it seriously. Paul is 'deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols'. Luke is not nearly as impressed with the philosophers as they are with themselves; but then neither are the philosophers impressed with Paul. The scene is set for a meeting between those for whom religion and the divine are areas of interest in the human search for knowledge, and the word which opposes all pride and self-sufficiency and insists that human projects submit to the divine as revealed in nature and in human experience. Jesus resisted the temptation to use his trust in God to impress others (see Luke 4:9-12). So does Paul. The philosophers feel free to deride or to disregard ideas that do not fit with the knowledge which they have acquired. Paul speaks of the way in which God has revealed the truth of God's amazing love by raising a man from the dead.

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

¹⁷So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

¹⁸Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbling want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

¹⁹So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' ²⁰It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.'

²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,

‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Though Paul’s opening statement is appropriately courteous, the word translated here ‘religious’ (Greek: *deisidaimōn*) can equally mean ‘superstitious’. In the light of Paul’s deep distress ‘to see that the city was full of idols’ (17:16), the ambiguity is surely intentional. Likewise, he generously assumes that the altar ‘to an unknown god’ expresses an admission of ignorance. It could equally be a superstitious attempt to cover themselves in case they might suffer the consequences of having left a god out. The custom of having such altars is well attested.

In any case, Paul begins by focusing on what he takes as an admission of ignorance – an ignorance which, though Luke does not stress the point here, Paul does not consider excusable. Speaking of those who ‘by their wickedness suppress the truth’, Paul writes:

Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

– Romans 1:20-21

Without referring to Judaism or to the Hebrew scriptures, Paul is carrying out here his mission as a Jew: to reveal the one true God to the Gentiles. Isaiah acknowledges the mystery of God:

I call you by your name though you do not know me
... I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other ... Truly, you are a God who hides himself,
O God of Israel, the Saviour.

– Isaiah 45:4-6, 15

As we shall see, Paul is not going to offer to take them out of their ignorance by giving them some extra information that would give them the edge in argument. He is not going to fill an empty spot in their circle of gods. He is going to tell them that the God whom they do not know has been revealed, and he is going to call them to conversion. But first he speaks of the one God who is the creator of all.

Paul's statements here about God not needing shrines or human offerings are in perfect accordance with Jewish faith, though Stephen felt the need to remind the Sanhedrin of the following statement from Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?

– Isaiah 66:1 (Acts 7:48)

As for offerings, Amos proclaims:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

– Amos 5:21-25

Jewish thought was that God did not need these things, but was pleased to receive them so long as they came from a genuine heart and were accompanied by justice.

O Lord of all, though you have need of nothing, you were pleased that there should be a temple for your habitation among us.

– 2Maccabees 14:35

On neither of these points would Paul have found any disagreement with either the Epicureans or the Stoics. Paul's reference to God as creator is also basic to Hebrew thought:

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.

– Isaiah 42:5

The key point that Paul is making is that it is not what we are doing that matters; it is what God is doing. And when we stop, look and listen, we discover that there is only one source of everything that is. God has made '*everything*' in the world. God gives to *all* mortals life and breath and *all* things.

²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,

²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

²⁶From one [NRSV adds 'ancestor'] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,

and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

Having stated that there is only one God, one source of all that is, Paul now goes on to draw out the implications of this for human beings. The first is that we all belong to each other because we are all made 'from one'. He may be referring to our common human ancestry, as the NRSV translation expresses. He may be referring to the fact that we all come from the same Source, referring again to God the creator.

By 'inhabit the earth', he means not simply a physical spreading out. He is picking up the idea expressed in the book of Genesis of the responsibility given to human beings to continue the work of creation, for we are made in God's image (see Genesis 1:27). It is our responsibility as humans to continue to bring order out of chaos, and to care for the earth and all its creatures (see Genesis 1:28). Paul's audience would have been divided in their response to this. The Stoics thought of the divine as involved in and caring for the world. The Epicureans, however, thought of the divine as being above such involvement and detached from the world.

Though God cannot be encompassed by the human mind, nor confined within the categories of philosophy, we are created so that we might 'search for God'. This is possible even though we may have lost our way and been distracted into worshipping idols:

The Lord will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the Lord will lead you. There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. From there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.

– Deuteronomy 4:27-29

Though God transcends creation, we are in touch with God whenever we 'touch' any of God's creatures. Paul's first quotation is attributed by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 1.14) to Epimenides of Crete (sixth century BC, compare Titus 1:12). It expresses an idea that would have been familiar to the philosophers in Athens. The Roman Seneca, a contemporary of Paul, wrote in a letter to Lucilius: 'God is near to you, and with you, and in you'(41,1). We think of Jesus' assurance: 'the kingdom of God is among you'(Luke 17:21). The second quotation is from Aratus (*Phaenomena*), a Stoic philosopher of the third century BC from Soli in Cilicia.

Paul is following traditional Hebrew thought when he points out the folly of worshipping idols ‘formed by human art and imagination’ (see Isaiah 40:18-20; 44:10-17). We recall his congratulating the Thessalonians because they ‘turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God’ (1 Thessalonians 1:9). In line with his argument, Paul here appeals to the fact that ‘we are God’s offspring’. God makes us; we do not make God. We find a similar argument in the Book of Wisdom:

Their lives are of less worth than clay, because they failed to know the one who formed them and inspired them with active souls and breathed a living spirit into them.

– Wisdom 15:10-11

Paul goes on to make the point that we have no excuse for such ignorance, and that the time has come ‘to repent’: to think differently about God and about ourselves in relationship to God, and to change our way of behaving accordingly. Once again let us reflect on the words of the Book of Wisdom:

If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator. Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. For while they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful. Yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?

– Wisdom 13:3-9

You are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent.

– Wisdom 11:23

Isaiah, too, promises forgiveness for those who genuinely seek God and are willing to turn from sin:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

– Isaiah 55:6-7

²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent

³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance [faith] to all by raising him from the dead.

Paul's conclusion is full of hope and the promise of life. He has declared that ignorance is no excuse. We need to repent and the time to repent is now. It matters what we do and we will have to face God's judgment. However, Paul stresses two factors as regards this judgment. The first is that God's judgment is just. We can be certain that God will judge us as we really are, but we can be certain also that God will judge according to who God is.

The Lord is coming. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

– Psalm 96:13

God, who is the source of everything that is, is a God who offers life and so pardon to all. As Isaiah says:

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

– Isaiah 12:1

We recall Peter quoting from the prophet Joel on the day of Pentecost:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

– Acts 2:21

The second factor stressed by Paul and the climax of his speech is his statement that God has appointed a man to be our judge. Stephen saw this in a vision (see 7:56) and Peter assured Cornelius of the same truth (see 10:42-43). By raising this man from the dead, God has 'given assurance to all' that it is not God's will that death have the last word. God is calling all to life. The Athenians need to repent, but Paul is assuring them that God is offering them 'the repentance that leads to life' (11:18).

Is Paul saying something more in verse thirty-one? The word which is translated 'assurance' is the Greek *pistis*. Is Paul saying that by raising Jesus from the dead, God is offering to everyone the gift of 'faith'? From the heart of the glorified Jesus the Holy Spirit is being poured out 'upon all flesh' (2:17). Jesus is offering a share in his glorified life to all who call upon him. To receive this life we are asked to open ourselves to the gift being offered. A genuine openness will, of course, mean repentance and allowing the fruit of this life to change our lives. This is what it means to have faith, and God is offering faith to everyone through Jesus.

Paul's next stop after Athens is Corinth. When writing to the Corinthians some four years later, Paul reminds them that his proclamation of the gospel was not in terms of human wisdom (1Corinthians 1:17). This was because, in the person of Jesus, God had shown how foolish is 'the wisdom of this world'(1:20). 'The Greeks desire wisdom'(1:22), but they will find true wisdom only by renouncing their own and embracing the crucified and risen Jesus, who is 'the wisdom of God'(1:24).

My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

– 1Corinthians 2:4-7

We should not see this as the result of disillusionment following his experience in Athens, nor should we conclude that Paul discontinued the kind of proclamation which he gave in the Areopagus. Paul knows that human wisdom cannot reach the conclusions proclaimed in the gospel, but he in no way despises it. What he does challenge is the sin of self-sufficiency that undermines any genuine human searching for the truth. A philosopher must recognise the limits of human logic and human wisdom. To attain to truth we must open ourselves to the gift of God's love revealed in Jesus, and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which can change our minds as well as our hearts and open us to 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, excellent or worthy of praise'(Philippians 4:8).

Dionysius, one of the members of the council, once again given the correct title Areopagitēs by Luke, becomes a believer. There are a few others, including Damaris.

³²When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'

³³At that point Paul left them.

³⁴But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul's speech at the Areopagus

Luke's aim in presenting Paul's speech at the Areopagus is not to give us an example of a failed and misconceived attempt at proclaiming the gospel. Rather, he has presented a model for the inculturation of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. The response of the Athenians is no reason to abandon the attempt, any more than the response of the majority of Jews should cause us to cease to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

What Luke has shown is that we must go beyond thinking if we are to discover truth. We must be willing to be engaged in an encounter with reality, including the facts of history. Central to this for Paul, and indeed for all the witnesses to Jesus, is the fact of Jesus himself, and what Jesus reveals about the one Source of all that is. Especially significant is the way Jesus faced death and responded to sin, and the way in which God 'raised him from the dead'(17:31).

Paul throws down a challenge to human wisdom to enter into dialogue with God who is present in the depths of our being and, indeed, is at the heart of everything that is, including human wisdom, limited though human wisdom necessarily must be. Paul issues this challenge in a way that is faithful to the best of Hebrew thought, but that is sensitive to the different experiences and different ways of thought of his Greek audience.

He does this from the conviction that Gentiles do not have to follow the law of Moses. Furthermore, they also do not have to think in the categories of Hebrew thought. What is necessary, for Hebrews and Greeks alike, and for anyone else who would attain truth, is that we recognise the limits of our thinking and behaviour, and accept responsibility for our prejudices, ideologies and errors. To do so, we must be open to see, hear and touch the real world and to open ourselves to an encounter with the God who encounters us there. To be able to do this, we must believe in what God has revealed in Jesus, and in the presence of Jesus' Spirit in our lives and in the world of which we are part.

Paul's message, as we have seen on numerous occasions, is a message of liberation. In Athens, it is liberation from fear of the gods, expressed in the 'city full of idols'(17:16). It is also liberation from the self-sufficiency that blinds us to the wonder and mystery of our own being and of the world around us.

A journey of seventy kilometres brings Paul to Corinth, the capital of Achaia. Ancient Greek Corinth was totally destroyed by a Roman army in 146BC. It was only in 44BC that Julius Caesar had a Roman colony erected on the ruins. The Roman city rapidly expanded and was made the seat of the proconsul of Achaia in 27BC. Its rapid expansion is explained by its geographical position. It dominates the narrow isthmus which connects the Peloponnesus to the rest of Greece. It commands two ports. Two and a half kilometres to the north the port of Lechaëum on the Gulf of Corinth opens westward to the Adriatic, and so to Spain, Italy and Sicily. Nine kilometres to the southeast the port of Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf opens onto the Aegean and so to Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. Many traders chose the overland haulage between the two ports in preference to the treacherous sea voyage round the Peloponnesus.

Ancient Corinth boasted a host of temple prostitutes attached to the sanctuary of Aphrodite, and had a reputation for lax morals. Roman Corinth seems to have inherited some of this reputation. At the time of Paul's arrival, the population was somewhere in excess of three hundred thousand. However, two-thirds were slaves and most of the others had one focus, which was to get rich through commerce. Apart from the constant turnover due to trade, Corinth also attracted visitors because of the healing sanctuary of Aesculapios, and the Isthmian games which took place every two years. Its position and the constant movements of people made it an excellent choice for Paul's mission. When Paul arrives, he meets a Jewish couple who have recently come from Rome. The scant information we have points to the year 49 as the date of the expulsion. It may have involved only a synagogue in which disputes over Christ were causing a public nuisance. The date fits the chronology we are suggesting, which is that Paul arrived in Corinth before the winter of 50AD. He shares their workshop. Then Silas and Timothy arrive, as he had requested (see 17:15). Timothy's arrival is mentioned by Paul in a letter which he wrote from Corinth to Thessalonica (see 1Thessalonians 3:6). Paul begins his mission, as was his custom, in the synagogue, 'testifying that the Messiah was Jesus' (see 9:22; 13:32-33; 17:3). He is rejected (compare 13:45-46). With the same prophetic gesture that he made in Antioch in Pisidia (see 13:51), Paul disclaims all responsibility for their refusal to believe, and announces that he 'will go to the Gentiles' (see 13:46).

¹After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

²There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together — by trade they were tentmakers.

⁴Every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

⁵When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. ⁶When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'

⁷Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue.

⁸Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household;

and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptised.

⁹One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.'

¹¹He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

The decision to share the home of a Gentile is indicative of Paul's missionary strategy. He is not turning his back on the Jews. After all he is only next door and Titius Justus was close to the Jewish community: 'a worshipper of God' like Lydia in Philippi (16:14), and like Cornelius in Caesarea (see 10:22). However, Paul's choice demonstrates that he is going 'to the Gentiles'(18:6).

In a letter written back to the Corinthian Christians from Ephesus, Paul speaks of having baptised Crispus (see 1Corinthians 1:14). As with Lydia (see 16:15) and with the gaoler at Philippi (see 16:33), the whole household are converted (see also Cornelius at Caesarea, 10:24,48).

Once again (see 9:3), the risen Lord appears to Paul in a vision, this time to encourage him in his ministry. His words echo the words of the Lord to Moses: 'I will be with you'(Exodus 3:12); and to Joshua: 'Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go'(Joshua 1:9). We recall also the words of encouragement given to the prophet Jeremiah: 'Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord'(Jeremiah 1:8). Paul is carrying out the mission of the suffering servant of the Lord:

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off'; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish.

– Isaiah 41:8-11

Paul's mission meets with considerable success, such that he stays in Corinth 'a year and six months.' Luke's brief account can be filled out from the two letters to the Thessalonians, written during his stay, and the two letters written back to Corinth after his departure.

Gallio, the elder brother of the philosopher Seneca, was proconsul of Achaia for less than a year. It is now established that he was in Corinth during 51AD, which gives us a fixed point for Pauline chronology. The accusation against Paul brought before Gallio by Paul's Jewish opponents is that he is proclaiming a religion which has no legal standing under Roman law. They are, in other words, informing Gallio that Paul's teaching is not consistent with Judaism, which did have legal standing. Gallio refuses to get involved. It will be ten years before there is any official opposition to Christianity from Roman authority. This happens after the emperor Nero married a Jewess, Poppea, in 62AD.

They seize and beat Sosthenes who is described, as was Crispus (see 18:8) as 'the official of the synagogue' (Greek: archisynagōgos). When Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians from Ephesus, he addresses the letter from himself 'and our brother Sosthenes' (1 Corinthians 1:1). It appears that the treatment he suffered here at the hands of some of his Jewish congregation helped to persuade him to follow Crispus into the church.

It is three years since Paul set out from Antioch. He decides that the time has come to return. It will involve a long sea journey which must be completed before the winter, so, probably in the spring of 52AD, he leaves Corinth from the port of Cenchreae. He is accompanied by the couple whom he met and worked with when he first arrived in Corinth (see 18:2).

Luke does not indicate the exact nature of Paul's vow. The fact that he cuts his hair suggests that he may have taken a Nazarite vow covering the period of his missionary work in Corinth (see Numbers 6:2-5). Luke is reminding us that his focus is not on Paul so much as on what the Spirit of Jesus is doing through Paul. Paul is a devout Jew, living in intimate prayer-communion with his Lord and conscious of the fact that it is grace that is working through him.

If, as appears likely, Gallio and Paul both left Corinth in the spring of 52AD, we might wonder whether Gallio's leaving influenced the timing of Paul's departure.

12But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal.

13They said, 'This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.'

14Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews;

15but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters.' ¹⁶**And he dismissed them from the tribunal.**

17Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things.

18After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut, for he was under a vow.