

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17.11.

Last time in our study of *Acts* we saw how Paul and Silas, on their 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey took the momentous step of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to *Europe*. At Philippi, Lydia, the seller of purples, was the first person in Europe to become a Christian. In *Acts* 16 we saw how Jesus changed the lives of three very different people: Lydia the prosperous merchant, the nameless slave-girl, and the rough jailer. The living Lord Jesus changed lives then, and he is still changing lives today. We don't *have* to remain the people we are. The whole essence of Christianity is *change*. Easter followed Good Friday; new life comes out of death, light from darkness.

After Philippi, Paul and Silas went to Thessalonica and then on to a city called Berea. The only reason Paul and Silas went to Berea was that their reception in Thessalonica was so unremittingly hostile, they had to be sneaked out of the city by night, *Acts* 17.10a... In Thessalonica Paul had followed his usual pattern of calling in first at the synagogue. After all, the Jews were God's people. Jesus was a Jew. Christianity was not a new religion, but the *fulfilment* of Judaism. So, from the OT scriptures Paul shewed his fellow Jews that Jesus was indeed the long-promised Messiah, the Christ, vv2-3...

Paul never ranted at people or bullied them into belief. He always *reasoned* with them, v2... Some of the Jews were convinced and believed, v4... In fact, two of St Paul's letters in the NT, the earliest, are written to the Thessalonians.

But the general response to Paul's teaching was downright hostility. The Jews started up a riot and attacked Jason's house where Paul was supposed to be staying, v5... They made all sorts of wild and hysterical accusations. The NIV translation of v6 is unfortunate ... Better than 'causing trouble all over the world' is the AV's 'who have turned the world upside down.' The town was in uproar, vv6-9...

And yet when Paul and Silas arrived in *Berea*, the reception could not have been more different. Now there was no hostility but a real eagerness to listen, v11... The Bereans have now become proverbial to describe a friendly audience. But even here the mad Thessalonians pursued them, v13...

Today I want us to think about these two diametrically opposed reactions to Jesus: the Thessalonian and the Berean. How could two towns so near each other be so different? Why, as Jesus himself said, is there good soil and rocky ground?

I know ministers and preachers who feel abject failures because they seem to make no headway with the gospel. But God's Word comforts us. Jesus himself spoke of good and bad soil. Here we read of Thessalonians and Bereans. So it's not *always* the preacher's fault. On a personal level I loved the people I met in Bradford, my first pastorate, but, as far as the gospel was concerned, the city was barren soil. Hearts were hardened and people didn't want to know. And hearts, as Jesus himself said, *can* be hardened. I used to hate staying with my grandfather, for he lived right next to a level crossing. We never slept! He, of course, got used to it and never heard. And *that* is what hardening of the heart is like. After a while, you

don't hear any more; you get used to it.

But when I went to Northern Ireland I could feel the hunger for the gospel. People were much more up-front about speaking about Jesus. There are Thessalonians and there are Bereans. That's reality, and Christians have to live with it.

But the responses to Christ vary not in *places*, but in *times*. When I was at boarding school, each day began in the chapel. For boys it was compulsory, and masters were expected to attend. The whole structure was in support of Christianity. But today things are very different. In today's British society the whole structure is *opposed* to Christianity. The teaching of Christianity as 'truth' which I had at school has now been cleverly subverted by 'RE' as 'comparative religions', ie relativism! Christian daily worship which, by the way, is still the legal requirement in schools, is largely undermined.

Why, we are asked, should the NHS fund Christians chaplains in hospitals? Well, the simple answer is that according to the census 73% of the population claimed to be Christian, our Queen is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England which is established by law. But such basic facts have not stopped the BBC from appointing a Muslim to be head of religious broadcasting and a Sikh to be head of the Christian *Songs of Praise* programme. It beggars belief, especially when the Director General is himself a practising RC. I could go on, but you can see how the structure of society has changed in GB from being supportive of the church to being actively opposed to it in the space of a single generation.

How has this come about? It's actually all in v7 where

the Thessalonians Jews accuse Paul of talking about Jesus as a *king*, and, moreover, as a rival to *Caesar* as king, v7... The Thessalonians, bad as they were, actually understood the issue: it's a power struggle. 2009 is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the spiritual forefather of Presbyterianism. His great theme was the sovereignty of God. But the great theme of the 18thC Enlightenment was (and still is) the sovereignty of the *individual*. We would say today, 'The consumer is king': it's all freedom of choice and human rights. So right away you have conflict between the sovereignty of *God* and the sovereignty of the *individual*.

Since the 18thC we have also seen the rise of totalitarian *states*, taking the place of God himself. Our Government would love to have total power, if it could get away with it. And that is why it works to destroy the Church which exists to remind our rulers that God, not they, are on the throne. So it call comes down to this 'Jesus is Lord' thing. It sounds so innocent, but it's the root of everything. The Thessalonians hated this Jesus-talk because it 'turned the world, *their* comfy little world of self-interest and power, upside down.'

It's a power struggle, and we Christians must not lose heart at what's going on in Britain today, but simply realise that we are no longer living in Berea but in Thessalonica. Isn't it amazing that the Bible written 2000 years ago perfectly describes what is happening today? So don't lose heart. Keep faithful, and pray for better days. It's God's struggle, not ours. It wasn't all hopeless in Thessalonica. People came to Christ even there. Just stay faithful to Jesus.