

Proper 25 A / 26 October 2014 ✠ St John the Evangelist, Oxford  
Exodus 22:20-27/Psalm 1/1 Thessalonians 2:1-8/Matthew 22:34-46

We speak, not to please mortals,  
but to please God who tests our hearts.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit—  
Amen.

“We speak, not so as to please mortals, but to please God.” You might not have thought that St. Paul was in great danger of being accused of trying to please people. In my own unofficial research, he’s the least popular character in the New Testament; least popular, that is, among those who are supposed to be good guys (Paul does come in ahead of Herod and the beast with seven heads and ten horns from the book of Revelation). Just last week a professional colleague of mine who teaches at a top-rated Theology Department in the North of England tweeted that he was teaching about Paul, “love him or loathe him.” Among seminarians and Adult Bible Study group members, I find that Paul has a reputation as a self-important busybody, not as a suavely debonair theological charmer.

Nonetheless, St. Paul feels the need to assure the Thessalonians that his appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery. Paul worries that the Thessalonians might think that he's been telling them good things about God and Jesus and about their newborn faith, whereas in reality God doesn't care about their sorry pagan lives. Paul wants the Thessalonians to know he's telling it to them straight, that God loves them just as they are.

That message comes directly out of the Big Book of Mission and Evangelism, sisters and brothers, and it's every bit as true at the corner of Marston Street and the Iffley Road in October 2014 as it was in Thessalonica in the year 54. The God who drew near to us in Jesus, whose love kept steadfast not only in jolly times around the fishing boats, but in the desolate times on the walk to Calvary — the God who became *Love Embodied* on our behalf came not primarily to pat the regular parishioners on the back, but to welcome the visitors, to persuade the drop-ins who might not be sure whether this faith business was for them. Paul promises the Thessalonians that this entire drama, in full costume with speaking parts to go all around, the whole kit and caboodle, was for their benefit.

And Paul's eagerness to set the Thessalonians' mind at ease paradoxically provided precisely the kind of circumstance that might unsettle them. "Where's the catch?" This God, about whom the Thessalonians had known next to *nothing* before Paul stopped in and gave them a quick pop-up preaching lesson on the saving love of Jesus Christ, this God asked of them nothing more than to *want* the grace that God *offers* — did Paul expect them to

believe that? The Thessalonians might very reasonably have suspected that Paul was just saying that to win them over, such that later he would spring the fine print, put the squeeze on them. They were waiting for the catch, the fund-raising pitch, the painful lower extremity body-modification that would really *earn* them salvation.

But St. Paul knew, and we remind you this morning, there can be no “earning” salvation, not by writing a big check, not by elective surgery, not by good deeds or unwavering assent to every syllable of the Athanasian Creed nor *even* the perfect execution of every particular posture and manual act from the *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite* (although on the great day when I unlock that achievement, I expect that it will please both God and people). All our diligent efforts to *win* God’s favour miss the point because something more surprising, more peculiar drives the gospel. Paul’s message, and our message this morning, addresses the newcomers, the “who-me?” visitors, the “yes-you!” visitors, the reluctant and the dubious and states flat out and with no equivocation, God loves you and stands ready to count you in on the big Good News. You will not be asked to prove your worthiness at the gate.

Is it that simple? You shall love the Lord your God, and your neighbour as yourself, yes; but do *all* the Law and the prophets depend just on these? The gospel *is* that simple, it *must* be that simple, but we dare not confuse simplicity with ease. The gospel’s very simplicity unfolds to reveal dimensions deeper and richer and wilder if we but have the patience and determination to keep looking. If we gaze longingly toward the heart of God’s mysterious love, we see not only the simple truth of the gospel, we also

gradually discern the vast exquisite array of intersecting threads that weave the sacred Word, the doctrine of the Fathers, the ascetical wisdom of the Saints, and the traditions hallowed to us in the liturgy, all into a sublime *Mappa Supermundi* before us. We see that *yes*, it's precisely the dishevelled, hungover, godless pagans whom Jesus came to save *along with* God's holy people of Israel, it's the idolaters whom Paul reached out to enlist in the tattered procession of saints through the ages. And still, there's always *more* to be understood, always a *fuller* appreciation of God's love to reach, always a *greater* obedience by which we can endeavour to show God's love in a world that just plain doesn't *get* the power of so simple and complex an idea as "grace."

Paul signals that depth with his wariness. He acknowledges how hard it is to tell the difference between flattering people with a feelgood gospel, and communicating to them the Good News of redemption. Paul understood that grace is so *magnificently* gracious that we can sometimes hardly distinguish God's goodness (on one hand) from simply buying people off (on the other) — and God takes the uncomfortable risk of seeming to offer us too much. Which is why Paul always brings God's judgment, that tests our hearts, into the conversation.

Now, when conducting church missions, when we want folk to come make themselves comfortable among us, we sometimes *soft-pedal* God's judgment for fear of scaring people away. Perhaps we don't want to think we're trying to extort faith from them with threats of unquenchable flames if they don't join our parish congregation right now, if they don't repent and make a big donation.

But St. Paul understands that God's judgment actually *strengthens* our proclamation of grace. When we admit that God knows our hearts *and judges*, we remember that God *cares* how we walk in our lives, and that God *knows* the difference on one hand between when we try to please mortals, when we try indeed to please our own *selves*, and on the other hand when we are truly, deeply, gracefully living to please God. When the world acts out of lust for power and greed, God sees and cares; when the church's leaders act to further our own interests instead of strengthening and building up *all* God's people, God notices and grieves; when any of us dresses up the temptation to manipulate and control in the humble vesture of disinterested servanthood, God recognises our pretence and *judges*. God judges, and that's *good* news because God judges with truth and grace and mercy; God judges, and that's good news, because *we want* to order our lives to reveal God's ways of patience and understanding, so that we become more luminous vessels for God's light; God judges, and that's good news, because under the cloudy skies of an allegedly civilised world, evil flourishes and goodness takes its lumps, and a God who simply ignores the suffering of the innocent has *no* good news to offer a visitor to this or any other church. Judgment and evangelism go hand in hand, because the message of judgment hangs on the message that God cares about each of us, all the way to the heart, piercing through any defensive veils by which we might try to put a pious face on personal interest.

Good news, welcoming, inviting news, sisters and brothers: we come here in the name of a *truth that will judge our hearts*, knowing that we do not ourselves have the right answers, the perfect

motivations, the unwavering devotion that could presume to suffice to earn us God's approval. Good news: we come in the hope that by gathering together with other disciples, with neighbours and visitors who behave and believe more admirably, more steadily than we do, we all may grow together toward a Way of discipleship that attracts us closer and closer to divinity. Good news, the best news: God welcomes us all here to flourish together, even if some of us look a little weedier than the rest. And even if we won't grow, we won't turn any closer toward God, we are welcome for the sake of grace, which can't be fully grace unless it is unconditional.

Good news, Thessalonians, Oxonians, staggerers and Orienses, even people from Cambridge, all who gather this morning to share the gospel of God and even our own very selves: Paul promises, *God* promises this morning that we have become very dear to Christ, as we have to one another; and our hopeful, loving gathering pleases God very much indeed.

AMEN

