

Receive the word and let it shape you!

1 Thess 1.1-10

After you've read a good swag of novels and after you've seen a good number of films you soon recognize that there are some classic narrative forms that get re-run time and time again. One narrative form is that of the *life-changing chance encounter*.

Take *Lord of the Rings* as an example. Smeagol goes fishing with a friend who encounters a ring and straight away there is an effect: Smeagol becomes Gollum and he's changed forever. Bilbo then meets Gollum under a mountain, and Bilbo's life and the life of his hobbit family is changed forever. It's a familiar story which I'm sure you've seen played out in various ways.

And sometimes life imitates art, doesn't it? My sister and her husband live in the Hobart suburb of Taroona. Taroona High School's most famous graduate is Mary Donaldson. Mary walked into a Sydney pub during the 2000 Olympics, met a nice young man with a European accent, and 4 years later became princess Mary of Denmark. So the story of the life-changing encounter is something we've heard of, even though many examples belong in the realm of fantasy rather than fact!

But there is one more real-life story that *is* closer to home for many of us, and that's the story of every man and woman who encounters the word of God and whose life is then radically altered. This is the story many of us have in common, and it's a story we share with the small church that met in the ancient Greek city of Thessalonica. Today's sermon centers on this change that is brought about by the word of God. Using the change that happened to the Thessalonians as an example, I'd like us to think about what this change looks like and how the change we experience can be a blessing for others.

We first read of the Thessalonians' encounter with the word of God in Acts 17. In that chapter we find Paul $\frac{1}{2}$ way through his 2nd missionary journey. As soon as Paul and his companions arrived in the Greek city of Thessalonica, they sought out the prominent Jewish synagogue that was situated in town. As was his custom, Luke writes in Acts 17:2, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. ⁴Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

As far as missionary activity goes, it sounds like a very successful three weeks. Within one month Paul had converted a good number of people, establishing a new church for the very first time in this important Greek port. But it didn't take long for the situation to become dangerously heated. Some Jewish leaders objected to Paul's teaching and responded violently. Things were so bad that Paul had to be smuggled out of the town at night, and the new Christians were left to fend on their own in hostile surrounds.

Understandably, Paul was quite worried about them. Out of concern he sends Timothy back and check on their progress. The image I have is of a young parent who has left their baby with the babysitter for the very first time. They call back throughout the night to see if everything is alright and to see whether the baby has done anything new since they've left. Paul is wondering how the Thessalonians are getting on.

And what report does Timothy bring back? Well, it's a report that leads Paul to write the letter known as 1 Thessalonians, and as he opens that letter he breaks out in great thankfulness to God: 1 Thessalonians 1.2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is incredibly relieved! "Thank God", he says "they're doing ok!"

You remember when Jesus taught his disciples the parable of the soils? The word of God is like seed sown in different soils: some seed on path, some on shallow soil, some on weedy ground, some one rich fertile soil. In some soils the word doesn't really take hold or produce fruit, but in some situations the word of God has a remarkable affect. Well, those three Sabbaths in Thessalonica saw the word of God fall on good soil. It had taken a deep hold in the hearts and minds of these believers, and their encounter with God's word had been truly life-changing.

So what exactly happened when this encounter took place? What did the Thessalonians see and hear that was so life changing? Take a look at 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1 verse 5: our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. It was the word of God, in particular the gospel of God, the message about the Lord Jesus Christ—both preached and lived out—that was the element which sparked this momentous change in their lives.

It's interesting that during his three-week mission in Thessalonica, Paul relied on both words *and* actions to convince the Thessalonians. I think there are two mistakes we can make when it comes to communicating Christ. On one hand we can think actions speak louder than words. You may have heard that popular St Francis of Assisi quote: "preach the gospel and if necessary, use words". That wasn't Paul's approach; his word about Jesus was a spoken word.

But there is another mistake we can make, and that's the mistake where we think that actions don't matter. Paul wanted to avoid that mistake as well, so his preaching was always accompanied by actions adorning his message. What actions did Paul use as he presented God's word? Well, in verse 5 he speaks about *power*, probably a reference to the miracle-working gift that he possessed. He speaks more generally about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And then in particular he mentions *the conviction* with which he preached.

Now what does Paul mean when he mentions his speaking with deep conviction? Does he mean he was super-passionate in his preaching? Good content + good delivery = successful evangelism? I don't think that's quite right. The final part of verse 5 gives us a clue: You know how we lived among you for your sake. Paul's Christian conviction was demonstrated in the way he lived.

I think the violent context of that three-week mission is important here. As Paul stood to preach, he would have done so in the face of an angry synagogue. But he stood his ground, firm in his belief, and that steadfastness in the face of opposition, it demonstrated something. It demonstrated that the message was true. It demonstrated the message was something worth taking a risk on.

There may be people in your own life whom you'd love to see have a life-changing encounter with the word of God. Here's a question for you. Do they see you believing with deep conviction? Do they see you sticking to God's word in the face of opposition? The temptation is always to back off from our commitment or to downplay the seriousness of what we believe. That response may make for more comfortable conversations, but it won't win converts – it won't result in robust belief.

And so as the Thessalonians heard Paul and as they saw Paul, many signed up. Their reaction demonstrates the response that such an encounter demands. Verse 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. I love the image of welcoming the message even though it was a message that's going to bring trouble.

We spoke before about classic narratives. Another variation on the life-changing encounter is the unwelcome house-guest narrative. The misfit sets up camp on the couch and everyone learns something new. The example that first came to mind for me was the show that made Wil Smith famous: *The Fresh Prince of Bell Air*. You can probably still see it on one of those minor network channels like *Go!* or *7 Mate*. He's the street-smart cousin from West Philly who moves in to his posh relative's house in LA. It's uncomfortable at first but you know it's a good thing for everyone involved.

That's what the word of God is like. It's a like Wil Smith! Funny in parts, irritating in others, and you're unsure as to whether you want him in your life because you suspect he's going to cost you something. But the truth is you won't have a story to tell unless you welcome him in. And this is what these Thessalonians did. They encountered the word, and instead of turning it aside out of fear of its demands they opened their minds and their hearts and they let it change their lives.

And so here's another question for us: how well do we welcome the word of God? Do we just wish God's word would rent a room somewhere else? Or do we welcome this guest in a half-hearted manner, keeping some rooms shut-off to his influence,

allowing God to influence one aspect of our lives but not others? A successful encounter with God's word means a life that is invaded, It's never the same.

And a life that's encountered and welcomed and word of God is a life that becomes a great blessing for others. Have a look at verses 7-8 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.

The context would suggest that it was the Thessalonians *example* that became known everywhere. Just as Paul's conviction illustrated the truth of his message, So too the Thessalonians' conviction and faithfulness under pressure illustrated the truth of the word which was spreading around the region. And so as Paul and his friends, people like Timothy and Silas, as they spoke about Jesus and planted churches people would ask: "Are we really convinced this is true? Is Christianity really worth sticking at? Well, look at the Thessalonians! They've bought into this! They believe it and they're living it out! Perhaps we'll stick with it as well!" If we genuinely allow God's word to mold our lives then that's going to be a great help for others.

Last Sunday night the 6:45 youth service was granted a very special treat, in that Ben Carpentier, a member of our 5pm service, he drew for them a wonderful sketch of church history. In 15 minutes he outlined the history of our people, the church. And looking back over our history some of the most incredible moments have been those moments when people have been radically bold in their faith. Ben told us stories from the great age of protestant mission, when missionaries in the 19th century would pack their belongings in a coffin and head off overseas with the expectation that they would never come back. And these stories would in turn inspire others to make similar commitments.

And vs7-8 teach us that God has always used Christian men and women to inspire one another towards greater faith in God. And so I have another question for you. Is your faith a faith that's worth emulating? Do you think you could be a good model for others, or do you actually think they might be better off looking to someone else? What kind of model are you providing for your family? There's a lot you can do for others by allowing the word of God to mold you.

So far we've been talking about encountering the word and letting it mold us. We haven't said a great deal about what the content of this word actually is, or indeed about the actual shape that it produces. Paul outlines the particular changes experienced by the Thessalonians from verse 9: for they themselves report what happened when we visited you. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

We've said that the word or the gospel of God is the message about Jesus, and the message is this: Jesus is the Son of the living and true God, he's been raised from the

dead and is returning to rescue us from God's wrath. When we allow this message to mold us the changes can be huge. For the Thessalonians, the biggest change was in the focus of their worship: turning to God from idols.

Think for a moment about how big this change would have been. Thessalonica was in the shadow of Mt Olympus, the home of the Greek gods, this was a big step away from the beliefs of family members and friends. Acts tells us that some were already investigating the God of the OT. Judaism was an established and tolerated religious option, but to become Christian was even more radical, and it's not as if they were about to join a church, there was no church, they were going to become the church. These Thessalonians were pioneers in a very dangerous place.

I've heard a missionary story from the south pacific of when a local chief decided, after encountering the word of God, to eat the sacred mullet that the village kept in a local pond. They had fed the mullet, they had reared the mullet, and then the chief decided to eat the mullet! That's got to take courage! Here was an animal upon which everyone believed the health of the village depended, and so it was a risky move to kill and eat it!

But if it's true that the God and father of Jesus Christ is the living and true God, and if it's true that it's Jesus who is coming again to bring us salvation, then it's worth allowing these truths to change our patterns and priorities: to change what we see as sacred, be it another religion or a football team, to change what we see as worthy of our time and effort, be it our careers or the collecting of material possessions.

So a final question: Has your encounter with God's word brought a change to what you worship and trust? Think about your pattern of life and the priorities you place within it. Do they indicate that you know *Christ* as savior and his *Father* as God, or do they point to some other god who is occupying their place?

To finish off I want you to have a look at these memorials that we have scattered around our church. We began by speaking about stories and narratives. In every church I've ever worshipped in we've had small plaques like these. Each one tells a story of a person who has worshipped here before us; the story of someone who's encountered the word and has had their life shaped by it. They tell of lives of great service to the living God and his people, sometimes over many years.

But they are not the only encouragements that we have in this building. Like the Thessalonians, we each have a role to play as we model to each other, in real-time and in real-life, the faithful act of receiving the word and having it mold us. Let's pray that God will enable us to keep living in this way.