

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, June 5, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Acts 17:1-15
“Uproar in Thessalonica”

‘These people who have been turning the world upside down ... ’

Well, they certainly had been doing that. Turning the world upside down, that is. For Thessalonica was in an uproar. It had all been stirred up by a bunch of ruffians rounded up in the market-places to form a mob. They had been searching the city for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly. Jason’s house had been attacked. We are not given any explanation for the attack, though in Romans 16:21, there is a Jason listed among Paul’s relatives or compatriots. The mob had dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities. Accusations were thrown around that they were not simply disturbing the city, but that they were *turning the world upside down*, and that they were not simply preaching something un-Roman, but doing something that amounted to treason: *acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus* Acts 17:6-7.

In what sounds like an incredible understatement, Luke says that *the people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this*. However, that doesn’t explain why *after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go* Acts 17:8-9. If the people and the city officials were so disturbed, why let Paul and Silas go? Wouldn’t they just go on turning the world upside down and saying that there was another king?

But whatever they were accused of, it all came about because the Gospel had been preached. It had started out fairly low-key. Acts 17:1 says that *there was a synagogue of the Jews*. Was there only one synagogue in Thessalonica? Hard to say. Chances are there was a Jewish population in the city, but no-one can say for sure just how large it may have been, and how many synagogues the Jewish community may have required. But whether or not it was the only one, over three Sabbaths, Paul went in *as was his custom and argued with them from the scriptures, explaining 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.’* Acts 17:2-3.

Note that at this point, Paul was preaching just to Jews, and only to those Jews who were in the synagogue. But his arguing and explaining seem to have been effective: *some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas*. But then his message began to hit home beyond the members of the synagogue: *some 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*.

And that’s when the trouble really seems to have started, because *the Jews became jealous* Acts 17:4-5. A great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women joined them, but Luke makes the point that it was synagogue members who became jealous, and started what developed into such uproar.

Remember what happened with Jesus, how the chief priests and chief priests and the elders of the people took him before the secular authorities over what was strictly a religious matter. So it was with Jason and the other believers. They were brought up before the city authorities to face the charge of turning the world upside down and promoting un-Roman thinking.

All because the Gospel had been preached.

In the meantime, Paul and Silas were spirited off by the other believers, supposedly to safety: *the believers sent (them) off to Berea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These 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. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. Acts 10:10-12.

But the trouble that they had stirred up in Thessalonica followed them: when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens. Acts 17:13-15.

All because the Gospel had been preached.

We rarely see such an effect today when the Gospel is preached. We rarely hear followers of Jesus being accused of turning the world upside down. In the western world at least, we hardly ever hear of believers being brought up before the secular authorities for preaching the Gospel. Please note that when I say that, I am ignoring the lunatic fringe of the church. They don't represent the Gospel as I understand it.

The church in the western world, during the Christendom era at least, became part of the world culture, part of the fabric of society. To belong to the church was to be a good citizen, a responsible member of society, someone to be respected and admired and looked up to. To be the church was to be an integral part of the establishment, whatever the establishment was.

That explains the silence of the Lutheran Church in Nazi Germany, the Church of England sometimes being described as the Conservative Party at prayer, and the fact that so often in the southern states especially, you are as likely to see the Stars and Stripes at the front of the sanctuary as you are the cross.

But things are changing. The Christian church no longer occupies the place it once occupied in western society. The voice of the church is no longer listened to the way it once was. Society is no longer interested in the opinion of the church and of people of faith when it comes to matters of morality and conscience.

And that can be hard to see, for those of us who remember how it used to be. It can be painful to see the church ignored, or sidelined, or disregarded. It hurts to feel that society is no longer interested in what we have to offer, when we have offered it so faithfully, and for so long, and when society has so obviously benefitted from what we have offered.

But . . . But is that really all that bad? Could there possibly be an upside to the church that things have changed the way they have? Could there possibly be benefit to the church that we are no longer seen as an integral part of the establishment, whatever the establishment is today? I can't help thinking that there just might.

There may be an upside if the new context in which we are living drives us back to the heart of what the church is all about.

There may be an upside if it drives us back to the heart of our faith and our calling and the great commission to make disciples of all nations.

There may be an upside if it drives us back to the heart of what we believe about New St James: that God is calling the people of New St James, as followers of Jesus Christ, to worship God and to serve the community.

And who knows what uproar may result?