



Living in Grace and Peace

VERONICA LAWSON explains 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 as a blessing and an encouragement to be gospel people in the Earth community.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the Church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus
Christ: Grace to you and peace. We

always give thanks to God for all of
you and mention you in our prayers,
constantly remembering before our
God and Father your work of faith
and labour of love and steadfastness
of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters
beloved by God, that he has chosen
you, because our message of the
Gospel came to you not in word
only, but also in power and in the
Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

The letter we know as 1 Thessalonians has the distinction of being the earliest extant Christian document. Its primacy in time accords it a special place in the Christian story. The first few verses of the opening chapter, the second reading for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, invites us to reflect on the earliest surviving written greeting to a community that had accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the anointed of God.

The triple authorship of this letter sometimes goes unnoticed: Paul, Timothy and Silvanus are addressing the *ecclesia* of the Thessalonians. While there is an occasional first person singular subject, indicating that Paul is the principal author, the “we” is sustained as subject for most of the letter. While the authors are all male and there is little indication in the letter that the addressees are other than male, this is not the word of one leading apostle: it is a communication from a leadership “team”.

Why does this matter? An ecologically sensitive reading calls for attention to the constructors and the construction of the divine in the text, the constructors and construction of the social or human, of the environment, of all that inhabits the world of the text and of what may lie beneath the surface of the text.

Ecclesia at Thessalonica

Who comprised the *ecclesia* of the Thessalonians and what do we know of Thessalonica? Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, a thriving metropolis situated on one of the main thoroughfares of the Roman Empire, the Via Ignatia. Its beautiful natural harbour attracted constant sea traffic from various parts of the Mediterranean world, as attested in the inscriptional evidence. The diverse cults in this populous city are well documented in the scholarly literature.

We can conjecture that among the “many devout Greeks” (Acts 17:4) who joined the Christian *ecclesia* were former followers of the cults of Osiris or Serapis or Dionysus or members of the Cabeiri, as well as members of the local Jewish synagogue. Luke has “some of the

leading women” among the Jews who “were persuaded” by Paul and Silas to join the movement (Acts 17:4). If Luke’s account is accurate, then the *ecclesia* of the Thessalonians was more gender inclusive than 1 Thessalonians might suggest.

The male images for the divine are consistent with the patriarchal bent of the letter as a whole: God is twice imaged as “Father” and Jesus is twice imaged as “Lord/*kyrios*”. These male constructions can distract us from the reassuring language of the opening address which emphasises the community’s inextricable relationship with the divine: the *ecclesia* of the Thessalonians is “in God/*en theō*” and “in Christ/*en...christō*”.

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An ecologically sensitive approach to these expressions might lead us to ask what constitutes the whole *ecclesia*. Is the *ecclesia* restricted to the human members, or might it embrace the complex of human, of other-than-human life, of natural and constructed environment? What does it mean to assert that the *ecclesia* of the Thessalonians or of any other community is “in God”? There are no slick answers to these questions. They invite reflection and ongoing conversation.

Greeting Carrying God's Blessing

Four words in *koine* Greek, five words in English translation, comprise the earliest extant Christian greeting: “Grace/*charis* to you and peace/*eirenē!*” It is hard to imagine a more beautiful greeting. It is an

expression of hope in the writer(s) that the addressee(s) might know the experience of total well-being. A cognate of *charis*, “*chairein/greetings*”, appears as an ordinary epistolary greeting in that world.

Charis in the Christian Testament, on the other hand, carries all the power of God’s favour, blessing, graciousness and steadfast love or loving kindness. Similarly, peace/*eirenē* has all the overtones of the Hebrew *shalom*: not just absence of war but a state of true reconciliation in the Earth community.

While the plural “you” in the greeting denotes first the Thessalonian Christ-followers and then their successors in faith, the ecologically sensitive reader knows all too well that there can be no grace and no peace without right relationship at every level. We might ponder the words of this greeting in our hearts and address them to all of God’s wondrous creatures.

Earth Community Yearning for Peace

In these times of pandemic and climate emergency, the inhabitants of our planetary home, human and other-than-human, are crying out for grace, for God’s favour and blessing expressed in restoration of life-giving habitat and home. They are crying out for peace, for reconciliation of the human community with the rest of creation and with God.

As gospel people today, we are called to bring that grace and peace to our world, “not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”. Just as Paul, Silvanus and Timothy tell the Thessalonian *ecclesia* that they are remembered before God for their “work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope”, we might give thanks for those who show us, in our times, how to restore hope to our fractured world. 🤝



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