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Introduction

I was recently browsing a list of people who have performed amazing feats; People such as Edmund Hilary who, with Sherpa Tensing, was the first person to scale Mount Everest, Captain Mathew Webb who was the first person to swim the English Channel. And André-Jacques Garnerin who performed the First Parachute Jump in 1797.

Garnerin invented the parachute and decided to test it out: In order to do that he leaped out of a hydrogen balloon 3,200 feet above Paris on Oct. 22, 1797. He survived that jump and more than 200 others. Two years later, his wife, In 1799, Jeanne-Genevieve, made the first successful parachute jump by a woman.

The thing that connects these people was that, in addition to skill and determination they possessed two things: Passion and Purpose. I think these are attributes that are needed for anyone who wants to achieve something difficult and demanding.

Over the summer in Morning Prayer we have been reading the Acts of the Apostles which chronicles the spread of the Gospel throughout the then known world and particularly follows the Apostle Paul in his missionary journeys. The things that Paul had to put up with were brutal, he was attacked verbally and physically, imprisoned, humiliated, had slanderous tales spread about him, was shipwrecked, bitten by poisonous snakes, and suffered from painful physical complaints. Reading the Acts of the Apostles left me breathless and wondering what his motivating power was. It was purpose – to share the Gospel with others and a passion to serve his Saviour and the people he took his message to.

We discover that when we go on, as we are currently doing, to read the letters he wrote to the people who had come to faith through his preaching and teaching. As we read them we see Paul the missionary acting and hear Paul the pastor speaking; and no less than in this his first letter to the Christians in

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Thessalonica. This letter was written about twenty years after Jesus's death and is one of the earliest pieces of writing we have. It doesn't have the deep theological knowledge of some of his other letters but it oozes his passion for the Gospel and his concern for the people he loves and is writing to.

This letter was written during Paul's second missionary journey. He had been travelling with Silas and Timothy. They had come to Phillipi and preached the Gospel there with some success but had had to leave there after Paul and Silas had been imprisoned. They came to Thessalonica where Luke tells us; " After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, ³ 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.'"

His preaching had some success and various groups of people came to faith in Jesus: some Jews, a large number of devout Greeks and 'not a few' chief women. The main success was amongst the Greeks who had attached themselves to the synagogue; dissatisfied with the low standards of pagan morality and of idol worship they were attracted to the Jewish faith by its monotheism and strong morality. But they were repelled by its strong sense of nationalism and ritual requirements. In Christianity they found a faith that satisfied. Some of the converts came from high-class families but it is probable that most were from the lower classes which is why in his letter he stresses how hard he worked not to be a financial burden on them.

The Jewish community was very unhappy about losing a considerable number of their congregation. We are told in Acts 17 that they were jealous – and they reacted with violence and incited a crowd to attack the house of Jason who was Paul's host at the time. They didn't find Paul but hauled Jason before the city authorities complaining that Paul and his fellow

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disciples had caused trouble 'All over the world' and that they were defying Caesar's decrees and proclaiming another King.

Paul and Silas escaped from the city, at least for a time, expecting to return when the fuss had died down. They travelled to Berea where their preaching was successful until the Thessalonian Jews followed them and stirred up such opposition that Paul was compelled to leave. Timothy and Silas stayed behind and then met Paul in Athens. Timothy went back to Thessalonica and Silas continued with Paul to Corinth where Timothy joined them again.

The last four places Paul had visited on his mission had been very discouraging. They had found a promising beginning followed by disruption in Phillipi, Thessalonica and Berea whilst Paul had had little success in Athens. So we read in 1 Corinthians' that in Corinth he began his preaching in weakness and fear and 'with much trembling'. But when Timothy came to Corinth he brought such encouraging reports of the continuing steadfastness of the converts that Paul saw that God's blessing had been on his mission after all. His spirits rose and he gave himself much more energetically to his preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was 'The Christ'.

This letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, written from Corinth seems to be in response to the account that Timothy brought of what was happening in Thessalonica. It is clear that the converts had responded wholeheartedly to Paul's preaching of the Gospel and had followed Jesus. But what is also clear is that they Jewish opponents of the Christian way were keeping up a campaign of slandering Paul. They were trying to prove that his conduct had been dishonorable – and that would have made life very difficult for the converts.

One of the most challenging things about being a missionary and a pastor is that you aren't only proclaiming the Gospel but in order to do it effectively you need to share yourself with people. One way of undermining what you are doing is to discredit you. It can be very painful. I remember in a previous parish someone decided to spread untrue and damaging

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rumours about me in the area where I was working. It was devastating. I was extremely hurt and didn't know what to do. Simply saying that these rumours (what we now call 'Fake News') were lies wouldn't have any effect. People would believe what they chose. I decided that the only course open to me was simply to continue my ministry. To show people by the way I lived, what I said and by who I was that the rumours were false. It was tough but eventually it had an effect.

Paul didn't have that option he was in another city 350 miles away. So he wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica to remind them of how he had behaved amongst them and what his purpose had been.

His opponents seem to have insinuated that Paul's aim had been to make a profit from the converts; that he was like one of the wandering philosophers or religious teachers who abounded at this time. They also seem to have dwelt on Paul's failure to return to them alleging that it showed he had no real love for them. They also probably suggested that there was nothing divine about Paul's message and that it originated entirely from Paul's own fertile mind.

Paul is answering allegations like this in the first three chapters of this letter to the people he had lovingly brought to faith in Jesus and cared deeply about. His words show his passion for his ministry and his purpose in bringing people to faith in Jesus – which had become his only goal in life. From what he says it is clear that the new church in Thessalonica was facing persecution from the pagans and pressure to return to the sexual immorality of their pagan past

So what is Paul's message to the Christians in Thessalonica and what relevance does it have for us today?

He wanted them to know:

- His visit to them had not been a failure. Not only had his preaching had impressive results but it had caused a permanent change of life in the believers

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- That what he had proclaimed was 'The Gospel of God', not his own message but God's plan for human beings' salvation
- That his service had been primarily the service of God. He hadn't been trying to please people with a soft message but had proclaimed the difficult truth that salvation can only come through faith in Jesus.

The underlying motivation for the whole of Paul's life and ministry was to please God. He never forgot his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus road and he was eternally thankful to him that he had taken time to stop Paul in his track and see the error of his ways. Paul is intensely aware that God tests our hearts and that as a preacher he had to be completely sincere. This is something I am very aware of. I find it impossible to preach on a passage of scripture that I haven't allowed to speak to my mind and heart first. There are some times when I am preparing a sermon when I have to stop and struggle with a part of my life, an attitude or behavior, before I am able to speak God's word to others. Paul wants his listeners to know that he had taught them from the heart and called on God to witness his sincerity.

Paul then goes on to say "8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

This is the essence of Christian witness. We cannot bring people to faith in Christ unless that faith is deeply embedded in our own hearts and shown in our lives. Preaching at people will have no effect on them we need to love them and they need to know we love them. We need to be sincere and they need to see that we don't have ulterior motives but we care for them and want the best for them.

When God came to offer salvation to human beings he didn't do it by staying apart from us and reaching into our world. He

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came amongst us , as one of us, he shared himself with us, even to dying for us. It is this total love and identification that has brought us new life and this is the love and identification that those who share the Gospel with others are called to.

Last week David spoke about a lady called Jackie Pullinger who from her early twenties has lived in the walled city in Hong King amongst the gangs, drug addicts and prostitutes. She hasn't judged them, she hasn't preached at them. She has simply loved them and offered them salvation through Jesus. And she has seen God working powerfully in the lives of some of the most damaged people you can imagine.

But there are people like that here in our own country, in our own communities as well. I think of someone I know called Graham, a committed Christian with a passion for young people. He worked with them in Central London and Hackney. He threw his house open to them and it didn't matter what time of day or night they turned up they received a welcome and a listening ear. These young people came from some of the most difficult situations, they knew about violence, and drugs, knives and neglect but they also knew about God's love because they had met it in Graham.

Most of us won't commit the whole of our lives to preaching or ministry. But we are all missionaries and are all called to share the Gospel – the Good News with others.

Paul said to the Christians in Thessalonica ⁸ So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

This is what we are called to do: to share ourselves with others. We may not be called to go to Hong Kong like Jackie was or to be threatened by Mobs in a Greek city as Paul was but we can love and care for others and show them how much God loves them, We can take time at work, to stop and listen to the person who is always complaining and difficult. Instead of avoiding them we can ask God to help us to see them

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through his eyes and realise that they may be complaining because life is difficult for them and offer support and encouragement.

We can ask God to show us who we haven't seen recently either in church or in the village. And maybe pop round with a small gift, a piece of cake or flowers picked from the garden. We can take time to talk on the phone to someone we know is lonely rather than watching a favourite TV programme or going for a walk with a friend or family member.

Jesus had passion and purpose when he came to die for us
Paul had passion and purpose in his missionary journeys when he strove to bring people to know Jesus
We too are called to have passion and purpose in our lives; to share ourselves not only with God but with others.