

An Emptiness and A Yearning

The person I most met ever that resembled the Apostle Paul, was a man called Stuart McAllister – he was a Scotsman who at the time I was aware of him live in Vienna with an organisation called Operation Mobilisation.

We had received an request from a local committee of Operation Mobilisation that Stuart was in Glasgow on a particular week, and would we like to have him speak at our Christian Union. We of course had a program, and had never heard of this Stuart McAllister, and said we could give him a slot at our prayer meeting which was the kind of extra meeting that ran on the end of our normal meeting. I remember him coming looking quite smart with a grey raincoat....

And within about 30 seconds we were captivated by this guy we had never heard of, Scottish but he had spent time in Prison in Eastern Europe for smuggling Bibles, but something in him absolutely burned... it just burned with the truth of the gospel, and a life that had been put on the line for it, for the way that he had travelled Europe in dangerous places contending for the truth of the Gospel.

Within 30 seconds we knew that there was something different about this guy. Something that burned.

Everything burns within Paul.

And he burns to take the fire to places where the fire has not burned.

So in about the year 49AD, after an argument with Barnabas - a fierce argument because everything burns within Paul

About Mark – in whom the gospel did not burn with sufficient fervour for Paul, He goes on a journey with Silas.

And they go across Asia Minor – Turkey

Turkey is huge – this is a big journey ... far from home... and the burning

He goes through huge Asia Minor

And through a dream of Macedonian Man – we are not far from where Stuart McAllister was – he travels to Neapolis – his first landing on European soil – and we think of the many who still yearn to make that journey across to Europe from Turkey, and he preaches, he burns with fire Philippi, Amphipolis, Appolonia, Thessalonica...

And people believe.. there is something

He has met God,

And there is a simple message – Christ has died – he may have said Christ died for you

God has revealed himself in Jesus who died and who rose, and he is coming

Turn from false gods and idol and wait for Christ who is to come.

And he spends a few weeks in Thessalonica,

And he loves these people

With only a few days with him, but he allows himself to burn
To feel
before going to Athens and then to Corinth.

And he really really misses the Thessalonians,
This is a kind of life with heartache built into it.

All this arriving and then this separating
He allows himself to feel the force of the world, he allows himself to love its people.

And so he tries to get to them, but he can't
So in Athens he sends Timothy, he can't bear it any more, he feels like orphans, he needs to
be with them.

In those days you couldn't press send, you had to send Timothy
So Timothy goes to Thessalonica, meets the Thessalonians, then makes it back down to
Corinth.

And Paul is delighted to hear that the Thessalonians are doing well.

But he still burns,
Because Paul burns, he feels it, he passionate about everything...
He is passionate about these people...

And he says in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, look at the intensity of the language...

"How can we thank God enough for you
In return for all the joy that we feel before our God " - *the Greek is literally all the joy we
enjoy*
"Because of you

Night and day we pray most earnestly – *the Greek is Hyperearnestly* – *that we may see you
face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith – I often wonder if that is the book
of Galatians and Romans, where we can see Paul's thinking about the gospel developing,
particularly around the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection*

"Now may our God and father himself – I have a sense that is, may the head of the
company, not just some underling, but God himself
Direct our way to you

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our
God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

It is an intensity of feeling
That is born because there is an intensity of separation.

The first thing I want to draw attention to,
Is that word hyperearnest...

Is there enough burning.
Later on Paul will write to Timothy and say “fan into flame”
There are a lot of smouldering embers that Paul would like to fan into flame for us...

And that is what Paul wants for the Thessalonians
That they would increase and abound in love for one another.

Do you love them enough... is there a casualness, an acceptance, a taken for grantedness in
our relationship.

If one of us was separated from one another, and had to live in a town 500 kilometres away,
a town which you had had to walk to to get there,
Would you someone to walk back to find out how they were after a few months
And would you say that because of being apart from you I feel like an orphan.

Do you see this life... it is a life of separation, it is a life of pain built in, because when you
love that much, you are going to feel sore, when you are parted....

And yet this is the life that we yearn for... a life of hyperearnestly praying,
And yearning,
And feeling like orphans.

It's life turned up to 11.

There is no one who doesn't matter in Paul's world.
And he prays that we would come to see how much we matter so much to each other.

This is one of the accusations against the early Christians, they loved each other too much.

Just like a rank growth of weeds, the abominable haunts where this impious confederacy
meet are multiplying all over the world, due to the daily increase of immorality. Root and
branch, it should at all costs be exterminated and accursed. They recognize each other by
secret signs and symbols. They love one another before being acquainted, so to speak.
Everywhere they practice a kind of religious cult of lust, calling one another “brother” and
“sister” indiscriminately. Thus under the cover of these hallowed names, ordinary
fornication becomes incest. – Minucius Felix

Or a more recent example, my friend whom I have often referred to, said that when the
news came through on Wednesday night of the drownings of the Refugees off Calais, she
went with her adopted daughter and they remembered how she had crossed the
Mediterranean in great fear, and they felt it, they felt it for those Refugees.

In some ways it would be easier to live a life where we felt nothing,
But Paul is eager that we love each other more and more....

But what does this have to do with Advent you may wonder...

The connecting point is the last verse...

“And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints...

For Paul, the greatest burning is for Christ... he is the one he yearns for the most
He is the one who has saved him
He is the one who will be head over all things
He will come to make the world right
He is the one who has made Paul right
He is the one who mysteriously with him now
He is the one who died for us
He is the one raised for us
He is the one who holds all things together
He is the one who gave up the very nature of God
He is everything
And Paul will cheerfully call himself a slave of Jesus Christ.

And this is the one we yearn for at Advent
At Advent we do not wait for Christmas
We practice our waiting for Christ

Because yes this is a waiting for the presents and the trees
And yes a waiting for the telling of the story
But above all this is a waiting for him
A waiting for his coming again
A waiting for meeting.

In this early Thessalonian letter Paul's assumption is that his meeting with Christ will be in the return of Christ
By the time he writes to the Phillipians he seems to have sense that his death will come first
And he writes
“for me to live is Christ and to die is gain”

I think we need to feel the pain of our separation from Christ
Just as we need to feel our pain of separation from Christians we do not feel
We have to burn with it
Yearn with it
Wait with it
This is what Advent is... the burning time, the yearning time, the desperate time,
I am waiting for him
So that in Christmas... yes we will meet Christmas, but we will meet him.

Coda

One final Coda...

Did you notice that it is not just Christ whom we will meet
It is another group of people...

“at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.”

All the saints we miss
We will see them too.

Because the whole dynamic of love contains pulling apart, the wounding pulling apart of
death
And then the bringing together
Of Christ and all the saints.

Feel the hope

In some manuscripts this verse actually reads..

“And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our
God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints, AMEN!”

Almost like a scribe has got so carried away, that he can't resist adding his own contribution.
Feel the hope

You feel the hope,
When you also feel the burning pain of separation

Feel the burning pain
So you feel the burning hope

And the feast we are about to have is a foretaste of the meeting we have to come
For we meet him too in bread and wine

Feel the pain
So that you can also feel the hope

AMEN