

ACTS 17:1-9
TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN!

Have you ever been involved in an Impact Study? An impact study is research done to try to discover the effect that you're having on the world around you. Most common are environmental impact studies: the picture is of an impact study on deforestation in Queensland, Australia, and you might look at the status of koala populations. It might consider the effect of building a new road or new housing in an area: the effect this project will have on the environment, on wildlife, on schools, on traffic. There have been projects held up because of the impact study: there are roads that have not been built because a colony of rare butterflies would be affected. Sometimes I wonder what we'd discover if the church did an impact study in our community, with the people who use our building, with people who live in our community: what impact are we as a church making? What do people learn about us by coming into our building? What do people in the street know about our activities, what we do and when? We like to think that we make a big impact on the people around us and a study might confirm that, but it also might give us a shock; we might not be making as much of an impact as we think!

What kind of impact does the church have? It is hard to measure! We're talking about faith to shape people's lives; or giving people a better sense of themselves; or bringing the notion of God to our lives. How do we measure these qualities? We'd like to think that any impact we make on our community is good. We want to see the mission of the church as entirely a positive thing in the world; we see what is good about Christian faith and we want to share that with others so that they find the blessing of God for themselves. But we all know that it is not as easy as that; we probably all have family members who don't share our faith, who've walked away from the Church or Christian faith for variety of reasons; I've met lots of people for whom the impact of the Church on their lives has been almost entirely a bad thing and so they've given up, they've walked away; it is hard to see what kind of impression we could make on them now to change their mind. God is on a mission; the Church has a mission because God has a mission in the world; the Spirit makes an impact on people's lives as we go about our business. Let's see how that worked for Paul and Silas when they visited Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a major city of Macedonia, in Northern Greece. Her history went back to the days when Macedonia ruled the world and was established to celebrate that world prominence; she kept her importance in the Roman empire, a city of around 200,000 people. It was an important place to visit on Paul's missionary journey; important people lived there, as we shall see. There was a Jewish colony there, enough to build a synagogue. The story of Paul and Silas' visit to Thessalonica is all about the impact of the gospel on that city: some of that impact was good and some was not; some was very positive, but others parts of the story show that sometimes the gospel upsets people! This was the first visit of the apostles to Thessalonica, but it was not the last; they would come back and visit again as they travelled through that part of Europe. God is building His church. The city is still there; the church is still there. The gospel made a lasting impact, more than Paul and Silas saw from their first visit.

Go to where the people are. That's Paul's mission strategy. Go to where you find the people to whom you can tell the stories of Jesus. Paul goes to the synagogue: "As was..." (*Acts 17:2f*) There was a Jewish community in Thessalonica, so Paul goes to visit them and being a visiting preacher and being a Jew, Paul gets a hearing, three Sabbaths in a row. In Philippi, he went to the river where he found a small group of women; in Thessalonica he goes to the synagogue because that's where the people are. That's the "Where!" of the strategy. What does he do? He tells them about

Jesus: *“He reasoned...”* (Acts 17:2f) It is all designed to convince a Jewish audience: first of all he tells them what Bible says, and remember that’s our Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures, and from the Old Testament, Paul talks to them about the Messiah. Messiah had to suffer and die; Messiah had to rise from the dead; Jesus is the Messiah. *“This Jesus...”* (Acts 17:3) Here is a Jewish message for a Jewish audience, couched in language they would understand. There must have been a Roman audience too: Paul preaches the same message in a different way, this time that Jesus is king: *“they are...”* (Acts 17:7)

The impact is seen in 2 ways: First of all, *“Some of...”* (Acts 17:4) Some people believed Paul’s message; they were persuaded by what Paul said and came to believe Jesus as the Messiah. They were a fairly mixed bunch of people: Jews, God-fearing Greeks, important women in the city. These people have all heard the gospel and have responded by believing it; they have come to faith in Jesus and here is the beginning of the Christian church in Thessalonica. Paul will remind them later when he writes to them that this was the power of the Spirit at work, God at work in their hearts to persuade them and so they believed; this is the power of the Spirit, not the power of Paul’s words. It is great, a cause for rejoicing; Paul would be delighted to see so many people coming to faith by his ministry; he would want to stay with them to help them grow in their faith; he certainly came back later to encourage them.

But not all of the impact of the gospel was good: secondly, *“but the...”* (Acts 17:5f) The Jews were jealous of Paul’s success; they didn’t like the fact that people were going to listen to Paul and follow Jesus, so they stirred up trouble! They created a mob and the mob was sent to find Paul and Silas and beat them up; they couldn’t find them so they took their anger out on Jason, we presume one of the new Christians and the person with whom Paul and Silas had been staying. Here’s the accusation: *“these men...”* (Acts 17:6) I love the older version of that verse: *“these men who have turned world upside down”* – it is not strictly what the text says, but the sense is right; they are “attacking everything we hold dear”, they are “disturbing the world in which we live”. They were preaching Jesus as Messiah and King and that message was challenging people, challenging what people thought, the way they behaved, and they didn’t like it. The apostles were doing nothing other than that; this was no political agitation or rebellion; they were simply preaching “Jesus is Lord” and that message was disturbing the world in Thessalonica. So the mob caused trouble for the Christians; being in the market-place was a dangerous place to be for the Christians in Thessalonica.

There was a time when all that churches had to do was open their doors and people would come flocking in; I was speaking to someone recently who told me that she found her Sunday School roll book from thirty years ago; there are a hundred names on it in the Primary 1-4 age group; churches opened their doors and people would come flooding in and they would hear gospel. It is not like that any more; this is the hardest time for Christian mission in Scotland that I’ve ever known and people no longer will simply come to us to hear the gospel. So we have to go to them and meet people where they are, to earn a hearing. Where do we meet people? We meet people in our families; we meet people at work; we meet people in the shops or where we play our sport; we meet people in all sorts of places. These are the places where we create and build relationships with people, so that later there might be an opportunity to tell them something of Jesus’ story. What do people talk about at the water-cooler, or standing around the photocopier? What do people talk about over coffee in the deli? We talk about all kinds of things; do we talk about faith? The Church needs to do our mission where people are. God’s mission was centred on sending His Son into our world, to the place where we are, so that He could save us; something of that needs to rub off on us, on the Church in 2015. Where are the people to be found? We need to be mission there!

There is one thing that has not changed: the message is still the same. We are still telling people about Jesus; Jesus is still the centre of the gospel because Jesus is still the Saviour of the world. We still tell people the stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection because these are still the stories that will create faith in the hearts and minds of those who hear them. The one thing we can't do is persuade people to believe; the Spirit's job is to persuade people to believe and He is still at work in the world, and is doing that today. We have to tell these stories in a way that people will understand. Paul was always doing that: to a Jewish audience, there was a Jewish way of telling about Jesus; to a Greek audience, it was a Greek way of telling about Jesus; it is the same story, but told in ways that people would understand. This message will challenge and disturb; the notion that Jesus is Lord disturbs us and the way we think and behave; it is inevitable that it will do the same for other people; Jesus' values are very different from the values of the world around and to tell the world that Jesus is Lord is to disturb the world, is to challenge ways and attitudes that people hold dear.

Mission in the market-place is a risky business. Some will love us and will embrace what we say and will applaud the church for being outside our walls and meeting people and listening to people and telling others about our faith and putting that faith into practice. But not everyone will be like that. There will be those who are critical of the church for all kinds of reasons; some will laugh at us for faith we profess; some will blame us for the faults of other Christians in other places; some will tell us that God is a figment of our imagination; some will tell us that all Christians are hypocrites and so on. It will be unpleasant. Mission is a risky business and we need to be prepared for that kind of reaction to the gospel. Paul and Silas discovered that mission was a risky business. God already knows that mission is a risky business: did He not send His Son into the world to accomplish the mission of God, knowing that it would end at the cross? We tell the story: some will love us, some will hate us; this is the mission of God.

Here's the thing: when God is at work in His mission and we are telling people the story of Jesus and what we believe, that has an impact. Isaiah saw that long time ago. God speaks: "*As the...*" (*Isaiah 55:10f*) The message makes an impact. God is at work. As we tell the story of Jesus, God is at work in the hearts and minds of the people who hear. As I preach this sermon, the Spirit is at work in your hearts and minds, to help you understand, to see how this applies in your life, to challenge you to put into practice what the Bible says, to learn to be more like Jesus. God is at work in our hearts and minds; His word accomplishes something, makes an impact on us. So it is when we tell people the stories of Jesus today: we may think it a waste of time; we may not see any response from people; it may be years before anything, but when God is on His mission, nothing is wasted.

A group of young men at a wedding: the kind of people whom we might think have no interest in faith and the Church. But they grew up going to the Boys Brigade and learned the Bible there and the stories of Jesus; it has stayed with them; they remembered these stories; they know that faith is important and talked about how they hoped they would find their way back to Church later in life. I hope they do. God is on a mission in the world; the Church has mission because God is on His mission. We meet people where they are; we build relationships; we tell the story of Jesus and when we do all of that, the Spirit is at work in the hearts and minds of those who hear. Every Christian has this mission! Some will love us and believe; some might hate us and laugh at us and worse. It was thus with Paul; it was thus with Jesus; yet God is at work and people are saved.