

Saint Paul visited the Thessalonians probably around the early 40s AD. He had been in Philippi, where he won a number of converts but also suffered persecution. When he left there, he and Silvanus and Timothy went to this wealthy city on the coast of the Aegean Sea, a place called Thessalonica, where he discovered a community of Jews and Gentiles. Paul stayed long enough to preach in different parts of the city, win some converts, and form them into a Christian community. He also witnessed some miracles. After the church there seemed strong enough, the missionaries left to preach in other cities. Some years later, perhaps while he was in Corinth, Paul wondered how things were going in Thessalonica, so Timothy went back. The church he found there was healthy, but the members had a few disturbing questions, such as, “What happens to Christians who die before Jesus comes again?” and “Should we give up the faith to avoid persecution?” Timothy apparently told Paul that the Thessalonians could use a shot in the arm.

So Paul did something he had never done before. He wrote a letter. He wrote it together with Silvanus and Timothy, addressed the concerns he had heard about, and sent it to the Thessalonians around the year 50 AD. Later, Paul wrote other letters, which all appear in our bible. But the First Letter to the Thessalonians was probably the first letter written by Saint Paul, and the first book to be written for the New Testament; it is older than the four gospels. The second reading at today’s mass gives us the opening verses of the oldest writing in the history of Christianity.

It opens formally with a greeting to the community, and then it expresses the reasons why the writers are giving thanks to God. Before Paul addresses the specific concerns of the Thessalonians, he reminds them of a few basics. First he calls them a church – the first use of that term. Then he calls to mind all the things they have done; namely, “your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Faith, hope and love are part of their lives, and these virtues show up in the community’s work and perseverance. Paul then reminds them why they responded to the gospel in the first place; he says the message came to them not “in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.” What convinced them about Jesus was not just Paul’s words, but his conviction and the power of the Holy Spirit, made present to them in miracles.

When the Thessalonians opened this letter, they probably looked for the answers to their questions, but first they read something else. Paul reminded them of how they had heard the word of God and what a profound effect it was having in their lives. We all want answers to our big questions. Sometimes those answers don’t come quick enough, if at all. In moments of doubt or loss, when we feel worried, alone or afraid, while we are waiting for answers, it is good to remember these specific things: how we first heard the word of God, and how it is bearing fruit even now in our midst in faith, hope and love.