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Christ Church West Wimbledon  
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**READINGS LUKE 21:5-19 & 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13**

St Paul was one of the world's hard workers, both in terms of working for his own keep and also in the service of God.

As a Jew entering a new city, he would have gone to the local synagogues and sounded out the Jewish community to see if they would be open to conversion.

As a skilled tent maker, he could set up shop providing tents. Tent making was a nice quiet trade, involving a lot of sitting on the floor or at a large work table, cutting leather into the appropriate shapes and stitching it with a range of very sharp cutting tools and needles. He was not going to be troubled by queues stretching out of the door, as leather tents are not something that any family was going to need to replace frequently. I like to think of him there, welcoming in potential customers with all the time in the world to talk, unhindered by constant interruptions or noisy working methods. In fact, a very useful trade for an evangelist, giving him access to people who he would not otherwise meet, in an atmosphere where the development of conversation on any subject would be quite natural. St Paul did not have to take an unexpected or unwelcome initiative. He did not have to doorstep anyone or barge in anywhere, but just took the opportunities given to him.

Work can be physical or intellectual and St Paul had his share of both. Tent making was hard work – leather is tough and heavy, and forming it into a big enough space for a family's mobile dwelling is not easy. And St Paul tells us that he worked by night and day to ensure that he was not a financial burden on his growing congregation.

Approaching deep spiritual and moral issues with people who might be potential tent purchasers, potential converts or in some cases police informers

must also have been difficult and tiring. Not all was work, though. There was the Sabbath day of rest. And possibly the night time shift making tents would have been sufficiently routine to combine it with prayer and contemplation.

So this is the context within which we should consider today's Epistle. As you would expect from Christ's teaching, Christian congregations were notably generous to outsiders, and especially to the poor and outcasts, unlike the exponents of the traditional Roman religions which did not encourage such generosity. It would not be surprising if the new congregations had hangers-on, attending solely for the bread, uninterested in the theology or in actual and real conversion. This is not the only place where St Paul worries about this kind of issue. In his first letter to Timothy, St Paul included some very odd comments, for example, on widows. At the start of Chapter 5, immediately after exhorting Timothy to speak to all older women in the congregation as mothers, he goes on to say "honour widows who are really widows" as if the death of a woman's husband is not enough – an apparently strange concept. What he is actually referring to is the list of poor and elderly women who the congregation should be supporting. Those who have families who are able to look after them, or who are young enough to earn a living on their own account, should be excluded from the "list of widows" to allow the congregation to spend their money more effectively.

There would also have been the possibility of the congregation being targeted by false prophets. People who called themselves Christians, and maybe even believed that they were, but whose teaching was not consistent with that of Jesus. These kind of people were quite likely to expect a generous living from the congregation in exchange for their misleading teaching.

Turning now to the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the opportunity for believers under persecution to testify to their faith even at their criminal trials. Believers should trust in their ability to do so, even without having prepared a script in advance, guided by the Holy Spirit. Few of us expect to be persecuted for our faith nowadays, although there are parts of the world where this does happen.

But there are many other opportunities for us to demonstrate our faith in the kind of way that St Paul did in his tent shop.

We can take advantage of opportunities which arise in the course of our work or otherwise in our everyday activities. Explaining who we are, what we do and why, in the hope that others will come to an understanding of, and belief in, our faith. No need to worry about what to say or how – the Spirit will lead. And if we are not successful on the first occasion that does not mean that it won't work in the future with practice and with prayer.

God bless you all, and help you in all your efforts to spread your faith.

Amen