A closing blessing: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

In Greek mythology, Eirene (Irene) was the goddess of peace, and was portrayed by Euripedes as the enemy of revenge, the lover of families and children, and the patroness of wealth (*Suppliant Women* 484f). When the Romans assimilated the Greek pantheon to their own culture, the goddess of peace was renamed Pax, and the poet Ovid asks her to ‘be present, and gentle the whole world. Let there be no enemies, no cause for triumph; you'll give our leaders more glory than war’ (*Fasti* 1. 709f). Writing to believers living in a pagan world, Paul wanted them to know that the only real God of peace is the God and Father of Jesus Christ (Romans 15:33; 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23). People sometimes suggest using the acronym ACTS to help us focus on for aspects of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Why not spend some time using these four approaches to help direct your prayers to the Lord as the God of peace?

Paul’s prayer is that the God of peace would completely sanctify the Thessalonians, and make them holy ‘through and through’. First and foremost, holiness is an attribute of God: what do you think it means for God to be ‘holy’? People or objects can become holy when they are dedicated, or consecrated to God, who makes them holy. What do you think 100% holiness looks like? For me, at least, it is all to easy to associate that kind of complete dedication to God with a withdrawal from everyday life, but that is not how God wants us to live. He calls us to be holy, to live for him in an unholy world, so that our holiness makes more of a positive impact on our surroundings than our surroundings have a negative effect on us – that kind of transformational living is quite a challenge! Ask God to help you dedicate your life completely to him this coming week, so that everything you say, think or do is imbued with his holiness.

Paul goes on to pray that our whole spirit, soul and body might be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Does this mean that he has a tripartite view of human nature? Are we made up of spirit, soul and body? Those who hold such a view (‘you are a spirit; you have a soul; you live in a body’) suggest that ‘spirit’ refers to our God-consciousness and finds expression through our conscience or through intuition. ‘Soul’ is about our self-consciousness, our psychological nature, our mind, emotions and will, and how we relate to others. The body pertains to our physiology, our world consciousness, how we relate to our environment. Does that help you understand more deeply what it means to be completely holy?

There are those who argue that it is not at all clear that our human nature comprises spirit, soul and body: where the Bible uses the phrase ‘your spirit,’ this does not support the view that our spirit is the bit of us that relates to God (1 Kings 21:5; Ecclesiastes 7:9; Malachi 2:15-16). It is perhaps more likely that Paul piles up phrases here in a pleonastic manner for rhetorical effect – he just wants to emphasise the idea of being totally holy, in every part of our being.

So, then, are we made up of soul and body? Critics of this view (anthropological monists) suggest that this ends up with the soul being like a ‘ghost in a machine.’ Because any thought or a feeling is generated in the physical brain, they prefer to see us as unified organisms of great complexity (Berecz), and the soul and body simply as two facets of a single entity. Who is right? Should we ground our understanding of human nature in a literal interpretation of Paul’s words here, or would that be a mistake? Does it matter, and if so, why?

What does it mean for us to be ‘blameless’? Looking at how this word is used elsewhere in Scripture, it seems that people are capable of living good lives, and we should not see a reference to sinless perfection here (Genesis 17:1; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; Luke 1:5-6; Philippians 3:6). But if it is possible for us to live a good and ‘blameless’ life, why do we still need a Saviour? Luke 1:18-20 and Philippians 3:7-11 may help us here.

In Christ, God makes us his holy people and we are called us to express that holiness in terms of how we live. We can never be perfect, but we can be blameless because God celebrates our successes and forgives our failures in Christ. Ultimately he is the one who keeps us blameless and makes us holy; it is all down to him. And as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:24, ‘He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.’ Why not use the ACTS acronym again to express a prayerful response to this?

When Paul talks about ‘the coming’ of our Lord Jesus, he is referring to Jesus’ return. But this Christmas, as we celebrate Jesus coming into the world as our Lord and Saviour, why not take 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, and make it a prayer for how you live across this Christmas period?

‘Almighty God, you make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive him for our redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come to be our judge; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(*The Alternative Service Book*)

*These studies will resume at the beginning of January*