

On Sunday mornings we have been following in the footsteps of Peter and in these last three weeks through Luke's eyes in the book of the Acts of the Apostles; this evening we get a snapshot of Paul and his ministry as he arrives in the city of Corinth, having journeyed from Athens, whether by boat or overland we are not told, but a journey of about 50 miles.

The old Greek city of Corinth was destroyed and rebuilt by the Romans. It stood in a strategic position to control trade across the narrow neck of land (4 miles), the isthmus, between the Aegean and Adriatic seas and as a result was thriving commercial city, with a cosmopolitan population. It was home to the Isthmian games, which were second only to the Olympic Games. It was just the sort of place Paul would target to establish a church, in the expectation that the Christian message would spread far and wide. But it was also a challenging place for the Gospel to take root: the Temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love dominated the city, with its thousands of temple prostitutes, quite apart from the great mix of people from different countries and a floating population of sailors and traders.

So Paul arrives in Corinth and immediately we see that he is a networker: he connects with people who have a similar background. Paul had been a Jewish rabbi and, according to Jewish practice, every rabbi must have a trade and take no money for his preaching, so they never became detached scholars and their teaching was rooted in the experience of everyday life. Paul often in his letters gloried in the fact that he was not a burden to the communities in which he stayed, for example: *we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed the to you the gospel of God* (1 Thessalonians 2: 9). *So he found a Jew named Aquila (2),* who with his wife Priscilla were, like Paul, tentmakers. Aquila we are told was from Pontus, a province adjacent to the South of the Black Sea, but most recently, with Priscilla, had come from Italy, perhaps driven out by an order from the Emperor Claudius, who banished all Jews from Rome in AD 49. They became partners not just in tentmaking, but also in sharing the gospel. In his letters, Paul will send greetings from them ( 1 Corinthians 16:19) and to them (cf. Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19).

As so often in previous places he visits - Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens - he goes to the synagogue: *every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try and convince Jews and Greeks.... testifying that the Messiah was Jesus.* When we read Paul's letters to the Corinthians, we can see the heart of his message: *When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* (1 Corinthians 2: 1 -2) It is a different approach from his message in the agora, the marketplace in Athens, where he debates with the philosophers there.

As usual there was opposition from the Jewish community. The idea of a crucified Messiah was one that Jesus' own disciples found impossible to accept, so it is not surprising. Paul leaves the synagogue, declaring that he will go to the Gentile community (6), but does not go far away! He lodges in a house next door to the synagogue in the home of *Titius Justus, a worshiper of God* (7) - that is a Gentile, who was drawn to Judaism. And we are told that *Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer* and with his household was baptized, one of the few that Paul baptized himself, for as Paul says: *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel* (1 Cor 1:17). Luke tells us that *many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers*

*and were baptized* and, reassured in a vision that the Lord was with him, Paul continued in the city preaching and teaching for another eighteen months; only in Ephesus did he spend longer.

Finally, in Luke's story of Paul's time in Corinth, the Roman state plays a role in the person of Gallio. When certain Jews seek Gallio's judgment against Paul, the Roman proconsul does not get involved. It's not clear whether it was from disinterest - these religious debates were not his concern- or impartiality - he knew that these were trumped up charges and Paul was not guilty of any crime. Even an outbreak of mob violence on the steps of the tribunal fails to move Gallio to action.

A snapshot then of Paul's ministry in Corinth, but rather than me suggesting applications to our own context, I suggest we do that in our discussion following and I have prepared three questions to encourage that:

### **Discussion Questions**

1). Scholars have contrasted Paul's missionary approach in Athens (Acts 17: 16-32), where he engages in philosophical debate and uses local culture (the statue of the unknown God in verse 24) from which to speak about Jesus, to the way he preaches in Corinth where he is focussed on the cross (1 Corinthians 2: 1-2). Do you think different people and places require different approaches?

2). Paul, as well as preaching, works as a tentmaker alongside Aquila and Priscilla. What are the advantages /disadvantages of such a model of ministry and what advantages/ disadvantages are there in releasing people in fulltime ministry?

3). Corinth could be seen as a strategic centre for the church to be established. What do you see as strategic places in our parish or city for the gospel to touch peoples' lives and be a force for change in our community and world?

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