



*One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.” Acts 18.9-10*

Have you heard the one about the new minister who had just been appointed to a new church? When they asked him, “What are your plans?” he replied: “I just want to find out what God is doing in this place, and get in on the act”. Finding out what God is doing, and getting in on the act, is a good definition of mission — ultimately it’s not Paul’s (or ours), but God’s.

Paul was good at building bridges, making connections between the life of his listeners and the message of the Gospel. In Athens, he looked around him and saw an altar to “the Unknown God” — and that becomes the foundation for an evangelistic message that starts from who you are, a person who is seeking for God, groping for God without knowing it, and builds a bridge to the person God is calling you to be: *He is not far from every one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said.* (Acts 17.22-28).

From Athens, he moves down the coast to Corinth — just a few miles down the coast, but a different world. What would he see there, and how could he use it to build bridges with the people of Corinth?

Athens was the intellectual capital of the Greek world — but, frankly, a bit of a backwater. Corinth was the commercial hub of the Mediterranean world, linking the trade-routes of the eastern Mediterranean with Rome and the west. A proud city, with a history as old as Athens — but a much more turbulent political past. Corinth had led Greek resistance to the power of Rome — and paid the price. Destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, the city was rebuilt by Julius

Caesar as a Roman colony, under direct Roman rule. In Corinth, you couldn't take refuge in the past: like it or not, your nose was always being rubbed in the political realities of the present. The Roman governor had his residence there; he dispensed Roman justice at the tribunal, the *Bema*, in the Forum, not far from the temple where the Roman emperors were worshipped as gods. Roman power and Roman entrepreneurs had made Corinth a wealthy city: and if you had wealth, you were expected to flaunt it. Corinth was a city built on the visible dynamics of power: wealth, status, and celebrity.

But the old Greek city and its gods were still there, underneath. The Temple of Apollo, in the Forum, was already 600 years old when Paul saw it. Apollo was the god of prophecy, the god of the famous oracle at Delphi, offering enigmatic answers to life's deep questions. Corinth was a city that respected spiritual power. It was also a city in search of love. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had her temple on the Acrocorinth, the great rock that dominates the city. Her temple, with its 500 temple prostitutes, gave Corinth a reputation for sexual promiscuity — which has rubbed off (perhaps unfairly) on the reputation of the Corinthian church (see ch.5). Is that why this letter has so much in it about sex and marriage — as well as the most famous chapter on love in the Bible?

But Paul doesn't start at the top, challenging Roman power or Greek religion. Unlike Athens, where he argued with the philosophers in the Areopagus, Paul begins his mission in Corinth in a much humbler location, in a tentmakers' workshop (Acts 18.1-3). Behind the grand public buildings of the Forum, as in every ancient city, were the narrow streets where traders and artisans set up shop — a great location for getting into conversation with passers-by. Dropping below the radar buys Paul precious time to sink into the day-to-day life of the city, to pause for a while and find out what makes it tick. *He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them* (v.11). Sometimes it's not the big noisy campaigns, but the quiet, invisible back-street work that lays the foundations that last.

Aquila and Priscilla came from Rome: like Paul, they were part of a migrant group, one of the many micro-communities who settled in Corinth and brought their own religion with them. So the synagogue (probably quite a small building in the back streets) provides the obvious starting-point for talking about Jesus — just as Paul had done in the other cities he visited in Acts. Here Paul could rely on a shared foundation in scripture, shared categories to explain the importance of “this Jesus whom Paul preaches” (v.5). It was a fruitful time for building up a community of those whom God was calling

But the Jews of Corinth, like all ex-patriate communities, had to walk a tightrope between adaptation and resistance, between the need to blend in (for survival in a hostile culture) and the need to stand out (to hang on to our own traditions, what makes us distinctive). This tends to make such communities resistant to new ideas: cohesive — but also fractious. So when Gallio, the new governor, arrives, Paul is hauled before his tribunal. (Gallio was proconsul in 51/52 AD, so that gives us a date for Paul's visit to Corinth.) He is charged with “persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law” (Acts 18.13) — but which law? Fortunately for Paul, Gallio decides that this is nothing to do with Roman law, and refuses to try the case (vv.14-16).

So Paul has to pack up his bags and leave again. He will visit Corinth again, several times — but most of his ministry from now on will have to be conducted long-distance, by letters and short visits. He knows that the little group of believers he leaves behind him will have to work out for themselves what it means to be God's people in this bustling, complex city of Corinth, with all its hopes and dreams. But most important, he knows — and they know — they are not alone — they belong to the living God.

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