

Sermon: Sunday 3rd May, 2020

The Christians of Corinth - Acts 18:1-11

For a few weeks after Easter over the last three years we have gradually been working our way through the book of Acts on a Sunday morning. Last year we joined the apostle Paul on his first missionary journey. We travelled with him through Turkey as he planted churches in Galatia, Iconium and Derbe. We eavesdropped on the Council of Jerusalem where the church leaders approved the momentous decision that gentiles did not need to become Jews to become Christians. And then we travelled again with Paul as he took the gospel into Europe, visiting the Greek cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Athens. We pick up the story as Paul leaves Athens and heads for Corinth.

We hear more names of people in Corinth than in most of the other places Paul visited, and a number of them speak into our context today.

Let's start with Aquila and Priscilla. They were Christians, originally from northern Turkey, who had become residents in Rome. However, riots had broken out in Rome that led to the Roman Emperor Claudius throwing all Jews and Christians out of the city. They had been forced to flee, and had ended up settling in Corinth. Corinth was the perfect place for their business. They made and sold tents and other leather goods - shop awnings, ship sails, market booths - and Corinth was one of the busiest trading cities anywhere in the Roman empire. They hired a workshop and began their work. And as they worked, they would have talked to passers-by.

A few years ago as a family we went to the ancient Roman port city of Ostia, just 20 miles outside Rome. (In fact, we were due to go back at the end of this month, but as with all of us, our holiday plans have had to be postponed.) One of the many breathtaking sights of this incredibly well preserved ancient city is the market square. On the ground are still the mosaics of different shops - a fishing boat for a fishmongers; a cow and pig for a butcher's; a chair and table for a carpenter's. The ancient street runs right alongside these mosaics. The tradesmen would be working outside, under their awnings, sat beside their advertising mosaics, talking to passers-by as they walked past just a couple of yards from them. As Aquila and Priscilla stitched the leather sheets together in their Corinth shop, no doubt they would be busy chatting to customers and walkers-by too, and one of the things they would talk about was their Christian faith. No wonder when Paul arrived in Corinth he should join them in a trade that he also shared, and together they share the faith with others. It proved the beginning of a great friendship and partnership.

Sometimes we can be tempted to think that Sundays is the day when we express our faith, that the other six days don't matter so much. But the example of Priscilla and Aquila challenge this notion. Our work, and our life outside of church, really does matter to God, and that is particularly the case at this time when meeting as church has become more difficult. Our work, our daily lives, provide us with the opportunity to worship and serve God.

This week I was asked to fill in a questionnaire listing all the ways people in the church are helping during this time of lockdown. I gave up in frustration. The questionnaire was wanting me to list all the church projects and initiatives taking place, but it left no space to acknowledge the most important work we as a church are doing - no where to indicate those of you who as nurses, doctors, careworkers, social workers and family carers are daily expressing your faith on the frontline; nowhere to acknowledge the work of those of you supporting vulnerable children in schools or in their homes, and in doing so, sharing Christ's love and compassion; nowhere to acknowledge the work that many of you are doing to keep businesses and companies afloat, to provide employment and an income for people; or providing the essential infrastructure support to keep the NHS and local government running; nowhere to acknowledge the phone calls and prayers by which you are enabling people to live and not just survive this time.

Aquila and Priscilla affirm the value of work, of daily life, as the place where we can all express our Christian faith. That is as true now as it has ever been.

Our next named person is Crispus, a synagogue official in Corinth. As such, he would have been regarded as someone of good standing in his community and in the wider city. He had much to lose by becoming a Christian - many of the synagogue were vociferously opposed to the preaching of Paul and Aquila and Priscilla and had forced them out. And yet Crispus, and indeed his whole household, come to faith. And we know he gets baptised, that great statement of identifying with Christ, because Paul mentions baptising him in the letter he writes to the church in Corinth a few months later.

If Priscilla and Aquila show us that we can express our faith through our work, Crispus shows us that we also express our faith through what we stand for. He was willing to lose his privileged status and social standing because he was willing to place his new found faith in Christ first. Those of you who have been following the daily readings in Ephesians will have read the extraordinary blessings Paul writes of that those in Christ receive - God's love, forgiveness, grace, calling, strength. In these times, when our faith is being tested in ways that we may never have expected, and when for all of us these on-line services are inevitably just a shadow of the joy and life we experience when we gather physically together in worship, in these times it is worth reminding ourselves that our faith is worth standing for, that the sacrifices are worth making, the gripping on tenaciously to faith is worth doing. Crispus certainly thought so - he was willing to give up much to be one - and millions upon millions of Christians ever since, many experiencing far greater challenges than we ourselves are going through, have thought so too. If we are perhaps inclined to give up, let us be encouraged.

And our third named Corinthian resident is Titius Justus. We don't know much about him other than that he was a "worshipper of God". But we do know that when Paul and the other Christians were thrown out of the synagogue, he opened up his own home to be used as the place of worship.

For all of us, our homes in recent weeks have become our main point of focus in ways they have never been before. Apart from our one act of daily exercise, or an outing to get essential shopping, we are confined to our homes. And our homes have become the place where we gather for worship. I'm sure for us all, we miss not only one another, but also the place where we worship, our church building, which is a place that can move us and inspire us to worship.

Titius Justus reminds us that the church two thousand years ago started in homes, not in church buildings, that where we worship this morning is no less sacred, no less filled with the presence of God, than our church building. It may take more effort, it may require more preparation of our hearts and minds to appreciate it, but together this morning we all stand on holy ground, we all gather in a sacred space, we all are in the presence of God.

Our encounters with these Christians of Corinth remind us that God is worthy of our worship, worship that we can offer in our work and daily lives, and in our homes. Indeed our lives and our homes can become sacred spaces, where God's presence can be known.

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