

Good Morning, and welcome to the first stage of our Armchair Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of St Paul. I think it would be a good idea to start by reminding ourselves about our guide on this journey, St Paul or Saul of Tarsus as he was also known. Saul was born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, now part of modern Turkey early in the 1st century AD. Although, the exact date is not known. In his own words writing later to the church he founded in Philippi, which we will be visiting next week, Paul describes himself as: *Israelite by race, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born and bred; in my practice of the law a Pharisee (Phil 3.5)*. He was a Roman citizen, but he was also familiar with Greek culture and thinking as the city of his birth Tarsus was one of the most important cities in the Roman province of Cilicia. Again in his own words: *I am . . . a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of a very important city (Acts 21.39)*.

The mixture of Greek, Roman and Jewish culture that he grew up in made Paul at home in most of the cities he visited in his travels. Paul was also well educated and spoke several languages, as he reminded the Christians in Corinth: *Thank God, I am more gifted in tongues than many of you (1 Cor 14.18)*. Before his dramatic conversion to faith in Jesus Christ Paul was educated in Jewish theology in the synagogue of his native Tarsus and as a pupil of the great teacher Gamaliel in Jerusalem.

So our guide is a well educated man, well versed in Jewish theology and Greek philosophy. Do we know what he looked like? Sadly we do not. The only description of him comes from a rather suspect piece of writing called *The Acts of Paul*, written almost 100 years after his death. *It describes a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long.*" Now this is not much more than a flight of imaginative writing by someone who never met Paul, but it is rather close to the way Paul says his critics describe him: *His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive (2 Cor. 10:10)*

There are many icons of Paul in the Greek Orthodox tradition, not a likeness as such but an image which is meant to draw you into the heart and soul of the saint. A connection between you, the viewer, and the icon is a window into

a closer relationship with God. One of the places we visited in Greece was Kalambaka near the Meteora Monasteries. It is the optional excursion in your guide so not strictly part of St Paul's missionary journey but a chance to see something of the history of Christianity in Greece. While we were there we visited an Icon painter, Father Pefkis, who along with his family produce hand painted Icons in the prayerful and contemplative tradition. It was not at first sight the most obvious *holy place* but just a small shop front next to the bakery along the main highway. But this is where I met my Paul, the Icon reproduced on the front of the guide. Of all the Paul's in the shop this is the one who most clearly spoke to me. In him I see a man at ease with himself, quietly confident and ready to engage in conversation about Godly things. So this is the Paul I have chosen to guide us on our pilgrimage.

We are familiar with Paul's dramatic conversion to faith in Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. But it is a different vision which determined the path of this second missionary journey. Paul, with Silas and Timothy was travelling in familiar territory across what is now southern Turkey when they arrived at Troas on the west coast, across Aegean Sea from Greece. It was here, the meeting place between the East and Europe that Paul's mission to the cities of Greece was set out by God. *During the night a vision came to Paul: a Macedonian stood there appealing to him, cross over to Macedonia and help us (Acts 16.9).* So Paul and his companions immediately set sail to take the message of Christ into Europe for the first time.

*We sailed from Troas and made a straight run to Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis (Acts 6.11).* This is the only information we have about the first city to accept the preaching of St Paul. We have no record that he ever wrote to the Christians in Neapolis but there is evidence that Paul made a impact on the city which is now known as Kavala. In the Byzantine period (300/400 years later) the city was named *Chrisoupolis* to commemorate the early Christian church established here by St Paul. In his time it was a thriving port for the nearby inland city of Philippi.

And it is to Philippi that we journey during this coming week. Hopefully, you are already in pilgrim mode and have started some reading, praying, journalling and even walking. As well as your Bible and Pilgrim Guide there are copies of recommended books available if you want to delve a bit deeper into Paul's story. I would just suggest that for me the best way to get to know Paul has been through his letters as well as his travels. We are tracking our journey using the Acts of the Apostles but be aware that while this gives us information about Paul's journey it is a second hand view of his teaching. So I suggest you read the Letter to the Philippians this week to hear from Paul himself how he interacted with this early Christian community, one the first on European soil.