

This is our last walk with Paul, the last stage of our Armchair Pilgrimage which has taken us from Asia Minor across the Aegean Sea to Europe, through the cities of northern Macedonia (modern Greece): Neapoli (modern seaport of Kavala), Philippi (now an archaeological site), Thessalonika (a modern bustling city), Berea (modern town of Veria) to Athens (the centre of education, philosophy and religion for Ancient Greece) and now *After Athens, Paul went to Corinth*. Perhaps disappointed by his failure to convince the Athenians to embrace Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One to use the Greek, Paul retraces his steps out of Athens. He walks that same road he walked only a few weeks earlier, lined with monuments, temples, altars to a variety of gods and goddesses. With the Acropolis and the grand temple of Athena, the Parthenon, at his back Paul makes his way from the northern mainland of Greece to its' southern most point. Paul is headed for Corinth the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire, a prosperous, ethnically diverse, multi-cultural, multi-religious city with a substantial Jewish population just as he had found earlier in the northern cities he visited. Before we join him there let us just pause for a moment as we cross the narrow isthmus with turquoise blue sea on either side, pause to enjoy the warmth of the spring sunshine and the peace of the surrounding countryside.

Paul finds an immediate welcome in Corinth, a city perhaps much more to his liking than the rarified atmosphere of Athens. This was Greece's largest and most important city in Paul's day, out shining the declining ancient capital of Athens. Today, like Philippi it is an archaeological site long abandoned, an extensive site where you can imagine the bustling Agora, market place, where Paul settles with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Pricilla, recently exiled from Rome. This time Paul is in for the long haul, plying his trade of tent making and preaching in the local synagogue. Timothy and Silas have rejoined him from the north so in Corinth we find Paul thriving in a real sense of settled community.

This makes his relationship with the Christian community, family in Corinth different from any we have seen so far. Paul is not just passing through preaching the gospel he is living, working and worshipping with this fledging Christian community. It is from here that he writes to the folk he left behind in Thessalonika who are having a tough time with those who opposed his teaching.

The other thing which makes Corinth unique is that it gives us the largest surviving correspondence by Paul to any of his communities. Especially if you remember that he probably did not write the second letter to the Thessalonians. We have the first letter to the Corinthians written a few years after his first visit and the second longest of Paul's letters. Romans is the longest. It was probably written from Ephesus in about 52 AD. Paul seems to have had an extensive correspondence with Corinth as 1 Corinthians mentions both an earlier letter from Paul and responds to questions the Corinthians asked in their letter. Wouldn't it be fascinating to read what they had to say since we have to remember that the record we have for Paul's writings is very one-sided.

The letter we call 2 Corinthians is not a single letter but probably parts of at least three separate letters preserved by the community in Corinth and later combined into one document. This letter gives us a vivid glimpse of Paul's continuing relationship with one of his communities. In 1 Corinthians Paul has sent Timothy to check up on things and promises to return himself. In 2 Corinthians it is clear that his second visit was painful for both sides. Paul goes on to apologise for a further letter written in *distress and anguish, with many tears*. This angry letter may be preserved in chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians the so called *angry chapters* where Paul vehemently defends himself and pretty aggressively attacks those in Corinth who have been maligning him and his teaching. This give and take between Paul, his fledgling Christian communities and other visiting apostles/teachers gives us a real insight into the growing pains of the early church.

There is a kind of false picture sometimes painted of everything in the early Christian communities being all sweetness and light. The church over the years has often tried unsuccessfully and unrealistically to recapture this *time of harmony*. What Paul's extensive correspondence with the Corinthians tells us is that it never was like that. The difficulties of people living in community and trying to live out the gospel in a largely secular world were just as real then as they are now. You may find this disappointing but I find it comforting to know that living God's will as an imperfect person, in an imperfect world full of other imperfect people is not easy. Paul loved and cared for each of his fledgling Christian communities that is obvious from his letters. Each had a different personality, each had varying challenges to face and each tried to find a way to live out the gospel of Jesus in an authentic way.

I hope you have enjoyed your armchair pilgrimage this Lent. Please don't worry if you haven't kept pace with Paul. He was pretty relentless after all and moved across Greece with strong sense of urgency. If you missed the coach a few times or wandered off to explore other things which caught your interest that is OK too. You can catch up, go back as Paul himself did and revisit a favourite place. For me I return again and again to the riverside at Philippi where Lydia and her household were baptised. I like the peace, the quiet, yet the sense that something really exciting is about to begin. You, on the other hand, may prefer the bustle of the market place, the excitement of engaging with others in preaching the gospel. I feel I should leave Paul with the final word, the memorable words he wrote to the Christians at Corinth in what just may be the most quoted but also the most challenging of his preaching. This is how The Message translates the final verses of this famous Chapter 13 from Saint Paul's first letter to the Christians at Corinth:

*We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!*

*But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.*