

Paul in Corinth

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 5th of September 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Paul in Corinth and is from Acts chapter 18 verses 1 to 23. As you drive around the Australian countryside and go to little towns and villages, almost all of them have some claim to fame.

Welcome to such and such a town, the home of the Loewenbird, or welcome to such and such a town, birthplace of Qantas.

There are three places that claim that in outback Queensland. Or welcome to such and such a town, the last town on the highway before Melbourne, and so on.

Some of the claims seem to me to be fairly trivial and insignificant. Welcome to Corinth. What would it say as you approached on the highway from Athens in 50 AD?

[1 : 16] Corinth was a town that had been destroyed in 146 BC, and exactly 100 years later, Julius Caesar, the emperor, had refounded the city and declared it to be a Roman colony.

And by 50 AD, which is the year that St. Paul arrived there in the passage from Acts chapter 18, it was the third largest city of the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria.

In fact, it was 20 times as big as Athens, although Athens was also quite significant. In some ways, Corinth was the London where Athens was the Cambridge of the Greek part of the Roman Empire. Athens, the place of learning, but small, Corinth, the very big capital of Achaia. On the map that you'll see, it's maybe a little bit hard to see, but I'm not sure whether Peter can point to Corinth, but it's on a very small isthmus of land there.

The Peloponnese is the sort of cow's udder that hangs from it, and Athens is just to the right or to the east, a bit further north. That's where Corinth was. Notice that it's at a strategic place.

[2 : 27] There's sea to the north and to the south of it, and land to the east and west. It was at crossroads of various trade routes, and that little isthmus of land that leads to Corinth was only three and a half miles wide, and in St Paul's Day, there was, in effect, a sort of railway to carry boats across.

The boats would come to one end, and then they would be pulled over logs to the other end because it was quicker to do that for three and a half miles than to sail all around the Peloponnese to the other side.

Thanks, Peter. Corinth was the commercial hub. The twin ports on either side of the isthmus meant that it was a significant trading place, and there was also trade, of course, on the roads.

For all those sorts of reasons, in Paul's day, Corinth was wealthy. It was a cosmopolitan city. It was an economic boom town. It was modern.

It was fairly liberal, if not libertine. At the top of the hill that overlooked ancient Corinth, what was called Acro-Corinth, was a temple to Venus or Aphrodite, the god of love, goddess of love.

[3 : 44] And around that hill would be sometimes up to a thousand female slave prostitutes whose services you could engage in your worship to the god of love.

In fact, so notorious was Corinth in the ancient world for its sexual licentiousness that the term to Corinthianize became synonymous with indulging in sexual promiscuity.

Welcome to Corinth, the ancient vanity fair, for that surely ought to be the sign that welcomed any traveller to this ancient city.

And to it, St. Paul came in 50 AD, not an eager tourist, but rather alone and in fear and trembling.

He tells us in the first letter he wrote to this church in Corinth, which he founded, that he arrived with fear and trembling. A little, weak and ineloquent man taking on all the glitz and glamour of first century Las Vegas.

[4 : 52] But why Corinth? Why would St. Paul, a Christian leader, go to such a place? Not because he wanted to see its sights, but rather because he thought strategically.

If you follow the history and geography of the Acts of the Apostles, the places St. Paul goes to are almost invariably significant cities of their day.

Places of trade, where people would come and pass through and deal and then go back to their hometowns. Whether it was Ephesus or Philippi or Thessalonica or Athens or even back in Antioch, the places Paul spent time in and went to were significant and strategic places.

Because there, if he won an ear for the gospel, not only would he see converts in those cities, but converts from all around the empire who would return to their hometowns as Christians and seek to propagate the Christian gospel there as well.

St. Paul thought strategically he didn't just go from place to place, but he picked out the places where the gospel would have the most influence if people became Christians.

[6 : 14] That also ought to be the way Christians think today. One of the good features, I think, of CMS, the Church Mission Society, is that at least in Victoria in more recent years, it is thinking very strategically about where it ought to concentrate its efforts.

In particular, in the cities of the world and in the universities of the world. Because if people are converted in those places, then the gospel can have even more influence through the leadership of people who are university graduates and in the major cities of the world.

It's also part of the strategy, I think, of a group called AFES, the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, that organises Christian groups on university campuses in Melbourne and around Australia.

Because such places as university campuses are significant and strategic for seeing people converted who will be leaders in industry and in nation in years to come.

Indeed, if more strategic Christian work had been done in the universities of Europe at the end of last century and the beginning of this, the history of this world may well have been different if people like Marx and other world leaders in foreign universities had been converted under the Christian gospel.

[7 : 33] Even the Melbourne Diocese is beginning to think a little bit more strategically about where its limited resources ought to be placed. Not just opening up and sustaining Anglican churches in every couple of square miles, but rather thinking about where the resources are most needed in areas of great significance or strategy in this city.

Well, in our own ministry at Holy Trinity, we also ought to be strategic, to think carefully about what is the most useful or influential place that we can be involved with in our own area and our own neighbourhood.

Because in the end, we can't do everything. Somehow we need to make strategic decisions about what is the best or most useful thing to do. When St Paul arrived in Corinth, he took up his trade as a tent maker, probably working in leather, and maybe not just in tents, or also perhaps dealing with a sort of goat's hair that would be used for making tents.

And in the course of his trade, he met a couple called Aquila and Priscilla, a married couple who had fled Rome a year before. In 49 AD, Claudius, the emperor, had expelled all Jews from Rome because of riots, which the Roman historians tell us were about Christ.

That is, it seems that Jews and perhaps Christians or Jewish Christians were having riots or disputes about what is true faith derived from the Old Testament.

[9 : 01] In order to quell them, Claudius just expelled them. And so Aquila and Priscilla, who were Christians, perhaps Jewish Christians, ended up in Corinth. Being tent makers, they met St Paul, they took him in under their roof, and no doubt they had great encouragement for each other in their Christian faith.

That model of tent making is often commended in missions today. You'll sometimes hear the expression used about tent making or tent makers. that is, missionaries who really fundamentally work at some sort of profession, but use that profession as an inroad into preaching and sharing the gospel in the places in which they go.

Mark and Jenica Graves in Nepal, whom we support through CMS, are an example of that. Mark is an engineer. He works in engineering in Nepal, in Kathmandu. But they're there fundamentally, not just to offer some engineering expertise, but to be a Christian witness in that country as well.

In many countries of the world, it's illegal to enter the country as a full-time Christian minister or missionary. And so the inroads for the gospel in such places tend to be, through people who are, in inverted commas, tent makers, the teachers, the nurses, the school teachers, and so on. Well, that's a good model of ministry, especially in places where it's illegal to be a full-time evangelist. But it's not the only model either. Paul's abiding concern was the gospel.

[10:36] And very soon it seems, when he's joined by some friends, Silas and Timothy, that he took up full-time ministry of preaching and teaching the gospel. But the model of tent making is not just one to consider for overseas work either.

For all of us in our daily work as Christian people ought to think of ourselves as tent makers, using our job and our profession to have inroads or opportunities for speaking or sharing the Christian gospel in our workplaces, in our home places, in schools and places of study, and so on. But also to see our jobs and professions as being places through which we can support others in full-time ministry overseas and at home as well.

That is, we're raising money in order to provide so that some people can be full-time in the Christian work of the gospel. Well, that's what Paul was really on about.

Not making tents, but speaking the gospel of Jesus Christ. And on the Sabbath day, we're told in verse 4, he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks, not limiting himself only to the Jews of the synagogue, but for anyone who would hear him.

[11:50] Still today in Corinth, in the ancient site of Corinth, you can see the stone lintel that would have been above the doorway of entrance into this Jewish synagogue that Paul preached in.

It's got part of the words on it still inscribed, the synagogue of the Hebrews, and it's in the museum in Corinth. But notice what Paul does in the synagogue. He doesn't go there to read the scriptures. He doesn't go there to present a sort of dissertation about the Christian faith. He goes there to argue and convince, and later on in this passage, to persuade.

That is, he recognises that the Christian faith is not just one amongst many equal religions, as though it's a smorgasbord, and saying, well, take it if you like, but leave it if you like.

He is there to urge, exhort, persuade, convince, and argue that the Christian faith is true. And it alone is a valid way, the valid way, for a person to get right with God.

[12:55] So he's involved in an aggressive act, so to speak, seeking to show people that their religion is wrong, whether it's Judaism or paganism, and that Christianity is right.

Now that boldness is not all that politically correct in our pluralistic society today, but nonetheless it's the model for Christians, because Christian faith is the only true faith.

It is the only right way for a person to get right with God. And therefore, in our sharing of the Christian faith, we need to have the same sort of boldness and clarity that exposes wrong thinking and shows that Christian faith is the only way and seek to persuade and convince people that it is true.

It's not just about saying this is what we believe, take it or leave it. This is what we believe it is right. Believe it and follow it. That's St. Paul's model.

Now not all of us are called to be St. Paul's. It's probably a relief for most of us. But rather, all of us as Christians are to be examples and speakers of our faith when the opportunity arises.

[14:11] All of us are to share the gospel. All of us are to defend the faith that is within us. That's why at Holy Trinity from time to time we run courses to help you in a nutshell explain what the Christian gospel is about.

Whether it's through our sharing the faith or EE or whether it's through everyday evangelism or some other method in the end doesn't really matter. But we need to be equipped in order to answer and explain what the Christian faith is about.

And of course that's why next week we're having Good News Week as a special week of activities to seek to persuade people that the Christian faith is true and needs to be followed.

The only hint of what Paul actually preached in this passage comes at the end of verse 5 where in the synagogue to the Jews Paul was testifying to them that the Messiah was Jesus.

That is to these Jews who knew the Old Testament that the hopes and expectations of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the one whom the Old Testament says God promises to send to restore humanity to God.

[15:26] Now no doubt when Paul spoke to Gentiles that is non-Jews he would preach the same message but probably from a different angle. We know he did that in the previous chapter when he

was in Athens.

There the people to whom he spoke were pagan philosophers. There's no good talking to them about the Old Testament he starts from a different point. But whatever his audience the message in the end is the same.

Jesus Christ and him crucified. They are Paul's words of summary in his own letter to the Corinthians. He says when I came to you in fear and trembling I came resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That's in a nutshell what the gospel is. It's about God sending his son Jesus to die for us that we can become part of God's family restored to a relationship with God.

That's the gospel in a nutshell. That's what Paul preached whether to Jew or to Gentile. It's the same message today. That's what we ought to be sharing with our friends and neighbours and family members who are not yet Christians.

[16:37] Well Paul after some time we're told in verse 5 is joined by Silas and Timothy. They'd been left behind in Macedonia in northern Greece in a place called Berea. Paul had sailed to Athens and then from Athens come to Corinth now Silas and Timothy have caught him up and joined him there and they bring with him it seems some financial gift we're told elsewhere in the New Testament from Philippi that seems to mean that Paul can now be full time in the work of the gospel and they bring news of what's going on in Macedonia and that news from Thessalonica in particular prompted Paul to write at this point one Thessalonians one of the other letters in the New Testament.

Well Paul's ministry does not meet with an overwhelming success it seems. His preaching in the synagogue brought opposition and reviling from the Jews there or at least many of them and after some time we don't know how long Paul in a symbolic act shook the dust off his clothes and said to them your blood be on your own heads I'm innocent from now on I will go to the Gentiles after some time Paul is in effect recognises that the opposition of the Jews is fairly stubborn and he will have nothing further to do with them turns away from them but continues preaching to others who will hear to Gentiles he left the synagogue and he chose a strategic place the house next door to the synagogue Titius Justice who is its owner has a worshipper of God a Christian believer we don't know whether he'd been a Jew or not but we do know that there was some success because verse 8 tells us that the official of the synagogue the leader of the synagogue had been converted a man called Crispus in 1 Corinthians 1

Paul says that Crispus is one of the few people whom he has baptised personally in Corinth that man with his household and many other Corinthians had become Christians through the ministry of Paul and no doubt each either Sabbath or probably on the Lord's Day the Sunday they would meet together if not even daily to worship God to hear the word and to pray despite those converts the enmity against Paul remained strong you see the Jews who rejected him they were not just disinterested it's not as though they couldn't care less and so when Paul left them they just breathed a sigh of relief but rather they continued in their opposition and antagonism to him two things are worth noting about this one is that the gospel provokes hostility when people hear the gospel they do not necessarily just take it or leave it and be indifferent to it it's rather two points that this hostility that Paul's gospel arouses one is that we ought to expect that the gospel provokes people to be hostile it's surprising really that a gospel of peace and love and reconciliation does provoke hostility and yet it does because the gospel undermines things that people hold very dear their own sense of achievement success their pride their self-righteousness their human power the gospel's a great leveller because all of us end up standing equal before God but the other thing about this is the encouragement to Paul not to fear fear in the end is what keeps us tongue-tied and timid we fear failure some of us fear saying the wrong words some of us fear our own inability some of us fear that we might look naive if we share our faith because other people may be more articulate or intelligent than us but above all

I think we fear rejection we hate to have somebody reject us when we speak the gospel Paul was given a vision in verses 9 and 10 to encourage him and reassure him that God would protect him and would be with him and though we don't receive that same vision nonetheless the reassurance from God that he is with us as we speak the gospel stands for every one of the followers of Jesus more than Jeff Kennett and more than Steve Brax what Melbourne needs today is the same gospel message that Paul preached well let's stop there and we'll spend a few moments in quiet as we think about that and to they to say this week we have more of those groups and we'll sieve so thank

you we have a good turn to the gospel and hope to tell us the gospel because of goodness we have not been a good turn certainly that means that's what I was very resource E if I were a guy they wanted to you to dare to