



2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A - St Paul and the Corinthians, Part 1

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6, Ps 39, 1 Corinthians 1: 1-3, John 1: 29-34

For most of us the encounter with God's Word comes in the Mass or the daily offices of prayer. This is necessarily in smallish chunks and without preface or context. So today, as we embark on St Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth, I will try to provide a little of that context and background.

Paul – or Saul as he begins life – is a Jew of the Diaspora. He is named for the first king of Israel, presumably because he is of the same tribe, Benjamin. Saul is a resident of Tarsus, an important trading city on the coast. His family trade is in tent-making. His religion is of the Pharisaic Judaism, a strict holiness movement. His education is from the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. His position under the law is that he has, by virtue of his family, the gift of Roman citizenship. This will play a key part in his ministry, giving him privileges and opportunities not available to his fellow apostles. Saul is highly educated and his intellect will leave some of his fellow apostles struggling to grasp the full import of his detailed theological exposition of the Faith. (2 Peter 3 v 15)

We know, from the Acts of the Apostles (and from his own accounts) that he initially regarded the 'Followers of the Way' (the early Christian movement) as

dangerous, heretical and a blot on the religious landscape of Judaism. His enthusiasm for their demise was illustrated by his presence at the martyrdom of Stephen, of which Scripture records his wholehearted approval (Acts 6 v58 – 60)

We know also that he was enlisted to go and ‘clean up’ the Jewish communities in Damascus (where the ‘Christian infection’ had apparently already spread). On his way he had a powerful mystical encounter with the Risen Christ which left him temporarily blinded and helpless, utterly penitent and henceforward committed to the propagation of the Gospel , no matter the personal cost.

Understandably the early Christian communities were very wary of this man. Was it a trick? Was he a plant? How would you feel about welcoming as a brother a man who had connived at the persecution that killed Stephen and surged through Jerusalem and beyond?

Because of the dynamic flow of the accounts of the Acts of the Apostles (effectively the first volume of Church history) and the necessary compression of events, we generally assume that, no sooner had Paul (his convert name) got his sight back and been baptised than he was off on mission. Not the case. He spent some time on ‘retreat’ in the Arabian desert , presumably making coherent sense of his theology in the light of the revelation of Christ and then some years, impatiently ‘quarantined’ by the Church at Antioch until he was chosen and required for the promised mission to the Gentiles.

The letters that Paul wrote were a direct consequence of his engagement with the communities where he had planted the Church and related to the spiritual problems and questions that arose for the newly converted in a world which did not understand them.

The Acts of the Apostles records Paul’s arrival in Corinth. (Ch. 18). He has just come from a preaching tour of Athens where, for many Greeks, his

teaching about the resurrection of the body is laughable. It was not a success. We can approximately date the Corinthian sojourn – he was there about 18 months. It comes after the Council of Jerusalem c. 49-50 and he met up with Aquila and Priscilla who were immediate exiles from Rome whence the Emperor Claudius had recently expelled Jews. The motive for this dramatic act – not the first in Roman history – was recorded by Tacitus, the historian, as being a result of agitation in the community about ‘Chrestus’.

This is assumed by many scholars to be a reference to Jesus and the rows in the diaspora community over His claims to be the Messiah. This would date the meeting as between A.D.50 and A.D. 54 (the death of Claudius).

The Acts tell us that Paul preached to Jew and Gentile alike then concentrated on the synagogue, moved in next door and converted the president of the synagogue to Christianity. It must have been a tumultuous time. Acts also tells us that his stay was about 18 months – time for a considerable amount of ministry, teaching and establishing the Church.

In order to understand the priority of this extensive part of the mission, we need to know something about Corinth.

The great city state of Corinth had been an irritation to the plans of the Roman war machine for total domination of the known world. In 146 B.C., in the wake of the destruction of the ancient enemy of Carthage, Rome looked for a *casus belli* to deal similarly with the Greeks. The battle was a rout. The upshot was terrible. Corinth was utterly destroyed, her men slaughtered and her women and children enslaved. For an hundred years the city effectively ceased to exist. Just before his assassination, Julius Caesar restored the city as a colony, a place to settle army veterans. It was to rise from the ashes to become, once more, a place of huge significance, indeed the capital of the Roman province of Achaea

which encompassed most of Greece.

The key to Corinthian importance was its geography. Greece is joined North to South by a tiny isthmus of land some four miles wide. All trade must pass across this narrow link. Traders East to West found that their journeys could be much swifter and less hazardous if they took their cargo here and either unloaded it and carried it to a waiting ship on the other side of the isthmus or, if the boat was small enough, drag it across on rollers.

Either way it saved the huge and dangerous voyage around Cape Malea (Matapan). On that narrow piece of land stands the city of Corinth. It was thus a magnet for merchants, traders, financiers, businessmen, hustlers, rascals and every kind of commercial opportunism. It ‘enjoyed’ the usual features of a thriving seaport but ‘on steroids’. It was no accident that the Regency term in England, ‘Corinthian’ referred not just to sporting prowess but to a habit of frequenting brothels. In ancient times the word ‘Corinthian’ was a byword for corruption. To be known as a ‘Corinthian girl’ was to be dubbed a prostitute. The Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, employed a thousand ‘priestesses’ who were nightly available for a bit of ecstatic worship. Taverns and whorehouses were the second industry of a thriving commercial centre. Corinth was rich, successful and decadent.

Into this bustling stew the Christian Faith was introduced and Church planted.

What we know from Luke’s account of Paul’s stay, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, is that it was prolonged and controversial. Paul has just arrived from a relatively disappointing outing in Athens. He had tried to argue with the gentile philosophers on their own terms and they were largely unimpressed. Now, in Corinth, Paul turns his attention back to his own people, the Jews of the diaspora. He is a regular debater in the synagogue. (This is a strange concept to us as churchgoers but Synagogue is both a place of worship and of study and exchange of ideas. Home remains the primary place of worship.)

After a particularly fraught encounter, Paul moved in next door to the synagogue in the house of a convert, Justus. Worse was to follow for his opponents. After a thoroughgoing denunciation of their hard heartedness Paul was on hand to receive the sometime leader of the synagogue, Crispus and his entire family, into the Christian faith.

At this signal, Luke records, there was a wave of conversions.

At this point the furious remnant of the synagogue attempted to engage the power of the state. There is precedent – after all internecine strife had lately seen Jews exiled from Rome. Thus they approach the proconsul of that year 51AD, Gallio, with their complaint.. Gallio is having none of it. Like most Roman officials he had little time for the special arrangements of the Jews and their incomprehensible internal squabbles and he rejected their complaints out of hand. What happens next is confusing. The angry litigants turn on Sosthenes, the now president of the synagogue, and beat him up while Gallio walks away, apparently unconcerned by this flagrant breach of the peace.

Did Sosthenes not present the case firmly enough? Was he in two minds? We do not know. What we do know is that, when Paul writes this letter to Corinth, from his beloved Ephesus, a year or so later, he is accompanied by a bloke called Sosthenes.

More next week.