

*After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. <sup>4</sup> Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. <sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. <sup>6</sup> But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’ <sup>7</sup> Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. <sup>8</sup> Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised. <sup>9</sup> One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. <sup>10</sup> For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’ <sup>11</sup> So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. <sup>12</sup> While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. <sup>13</sup> ‘This man,’ they charged, ‘is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.’ <sup>14</sup> Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, ‘If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanour or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. <sup>15</sup> But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law – settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.’ <sup>16</sup> So he drove them off. <sup>17</sup> Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.*

Last week Paul was in Athens, and debating with the men in the market places and in the Areopagus. There were a few converts and Paul soon left Athens and headed for Corinth.

Corinth was a port city with a bad reputation. Calling someone a Corinthian was tantamount to calling them a sex worker. It was a centre of worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of love: lewd and immoral behaviour was expected of her followers whose attitudes to sex were pretty relaxed. Chapter 1 of Paul’s letter to the Romans (which is believed to have been written in Corinth) warns against immorality, and Rome was no different from Corinth. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul chastises the believers who associate with immoral greedy idolators (Chapters 5 & 6), some of whom are in the church!

In the first few verses we get some historical knowledge – a couple of Jews – Aquila and his wife Priscilla have come to Corinth after being expelled with all the Jews from Rome by Claudius in AD43. Apparently the Jews were troublesome. Suetonius writing 70 years later said that the Jews were rioting and so they had to go. What precisely they were rioting over is unclear. It is now that Luke reveals that Paul is a tentmaker, like Aquila and his wife Priscilla. These would have been leather, goatskin or linen small tents used by travellers. However archaeology has found inscriptions of Gallio as proconsul of the senatorial province of Achaia (Athens, Corinth, Delphi) in the 26<sup>th</sup> year of Claudius’ reign which puts the date AD 52. He was effectively the governor of the province and the most important Roman official in the region. Paul would have arrived a year earlier. Aquila and Priscilla were already established in Corinth and Paul appears to have joined their business and stayed with them. He considers them his fellow workers in the ministry of Jesus Christ (Romans 16:3) and they are mentioned on the first letter to the Corinthians 16:19 sending greetings to the churches in Asia, and in 2 Timothy 4:19.

As Paul begins his mission in Corinth, as usual he begins in the synagogue, reasoning with the Jews and Greeks explaining that Jesus is the Messiah on the sabbath. Reading between the lines, he was doing his tent making during the week. Then Silas and Timothy arrive and Paul is freed to spend more time preaching the Gospel. The result was opposition and abuse. We now come to one of the troublesome verses which has resulted in anti-semitic abuse and worse.

*<sup>6</sup> But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’*

In shaking out his clothes, Paul would be symbolically ridding himself of anything found in the synagogue and making a gesture of defiance, with words that have been used as the blood libel against the Jews for centuries. The Syriac early versions of Acts omit the words “your blood be on your own heads”. The other verse that lays the blame for the death of Jesus on the Jews is in Matthew 27:25 where the crowd says “his blood be on us and our children”. So what exactly does Paul mean by “your blood be on your own heads”? It means they were the authors of their own

destruction and would be judged for their actions rejecting the Gospel. The 5<sup>th</sup> century commentator, Ammonius, explained this in powerful terms when he wrote the following:

*“Your blood be on your own heads.” These words are obscure, but I think they mean this: Whoever does not believe in Christ, who is life, seems to kill himself by passing from life to death and shedding, as it were, his own blood through self-inflicted death. Therefore he means that when you kill yourselves through disbelief, you receive the punishment of murder, so I am innocent. Following this train of thought it may be also said that he who kills himself is punished by God as a murderer. Similarly if a person is the reason why someone kills himself, he will be guilty in the same way.’*

As we saw last week, Paul says some direct things to people which today might by some seem as condemnatory, yet the truth is often harsh. Acts 16:29-31 <sup>29</sup> *‘Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’* Ignorance of who the creator God is and the need to repent is no longer an excuse for escaping God’s judgement. Jesus said in Matthew 12:30 *‘Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.’* Which is pretty unequivocal when it comes to those who oppose the Gospel. We all know Jesus loves us, but he also expects us to love him, and obey all he has commanded. Our relationship has to be two sided. Jesus said in Revelation 3:19-20 *“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. <sup>20</sup> Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”*

Paul seems to wash his hands of the Jews and as he did elsewhere, move on to the Gentiles, who may be more receptive to the Gospel. However he did have the synagogue leader Crispus and his entire household as converts and they just happened to live next door to the synagogue.

<sup>9</sup> *One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. <sup>10</sup> For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’ <sup>11</sup> So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.*

It would seem Paul was afraid of the same treatment he had received in Philippi and Thessalonica repeating itself. Thankfully Jesus reassures him he is not going to be harmed and that there are many believers in Corinth already. Then we get a throwaway line in verse 11 telling us that Paul stayed in Corinth a year and a half. That’s a long time to be ministering to the Corinthians! And still they needed 2 letters to remind them of all he had been teaching them over those one and a half years. That shows how easily believers can be led astray with jealousy among followers of different leaders; how easily believers can slip back into their old immoral ways; how easily they can argue among themselves and seek justice outside the church; how easily they go back to their old ways eating food sacrificed to idols and making light of celebrating the Lord’s supper as a free dinner; how easily they can be deceived by false apostles. 2 Corinthians 12:20-21 sums it up: <sup>20</sup> *For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. <sup>21</sup> I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.*

So after just a few years the church in Corinth for which Paul had such high hopes slipped down a slippery slope to impurity, sexual sin and debauchery. We see the same with some of the seven Asian (that is Asia Minor) churches in John’s Revelation, though this forty years later when John was very old... written in around 95AD, while Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians was written around 55AD just five years after he first arrived in Corinth. It seems that among the Gentiles without that grounding in the law of Moses, slipping back was much easier because for the most of their lives they lived according to the rather lax customs of Corinth... which was known as city of ill repute. It’s a bit like today where Christians are trying to get converts from people where several generations have grown up with lax morals, serial sexual partnerships and selfish hedonism. For them it is really hard because of the complete lifestyle change involved in following Christ, and many will drift back after that initial phase of joy and euphoria encountering the Holy Spirit for the first time and being convicted of their sinfulness.

Luke’s narrative jumps a year and a half.

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. <sup>13</sup> 'This man,' they charged, 'is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.' <sup>14</sup> Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, 'If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanour or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. <sup>15</sup> But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law – settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.' <sup>16</sup> So he drove them off.

These Jews were seeing their congregation dwindling as Paul gained converts to the Way, and matters came to a head with them seeking to get rid of Paul who lived next door to the synagogue. They brought a charge based on religious law, similar to that brought against Jesus. The Romans weren't interested in religious disputes unless they caused disorder. Pilate couldn't find Jesus guilty of law breaking, and neither could Gallio. Taking the matter to the highest official in Achaia was a mistake because he really didn't want to be bothered with matters outside his jurisdiction. Gallio gave the Jews short shrift and is to be commended for his worldly wisdom. As mentioned earlier Gallio's period of office is recorded in stone: AD51. He was son of Seneca the elder and his brother Seneca the younger was tutor of the young Nero. He is friend of emperor Claudius as recorded on an inscription in Delphi. He was said by his brother to be someone who could not be swayed by shameless flattery. The Jews of Corinth had gone to the wrong man to plead their case, which was dismissed before Paul got a chance even to speak.

<sup>17</sup> Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

The ruler of the synagogue Sosthenes who replaced Crispus was beaten up by his own supporters and Gallio probably thought it well deserved for wasting his time with a stupid request based on laws he had probably never heard of and thought daft if the issue was over the resurrection of someone twenty years ago who he hadn't heard of either. Crispus was one of the few Paul himself baptised and is believed later to have been made bishop of Chalcedon (opposite Istanbul/Constantinople) and was martyred for his faith.

What can we take from this passage? The key things are:

(1) that Paul makes a living tentmaking, not relying on outside support. He reiterates this point in his second letter to the Thessalonians chapter 3. <sup>6</sup> *In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.* <sup>7</sup> *For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,* <sup>8</sup> *nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.* <sup>9</sup> *We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.* <sup>10</sup> *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.'* No believer should be idle waiting for Jesus to return and nor expect others to support him. Sharing what they had with each other (as in the first months of the church) is fine but it does imply you have something to share generated either from the work done, savings or assets sold.

(2) that Paul despite all his time spent teaching people, much of what he taught hadn't sunk in very deeply which is why he had to write two letters inside three years to the Corinthians to remind them of what being a Christian involved. We too need constant reminding by reading and hearing the Word of God to keep our eyes on Jesus and to avoid drifting away into the ways of the world.

(3) that we cannot rely on worldly support for our beliefs. There will be opposition to Christianity and there is much persecution of Christians throughout the world. In the early church, up until the fourth century when Constantine imposed Christianity as Rome's official religion, there was a lot of opposition and many were martyred for their faith. We may think there is protection for Christians and other religions in Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 which states the following:

*Freedom of thought, conscience and religion*

*1 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.*

*2 Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.*

It has limitations in paragraph 2 and as such the rights of Christians "in public to manifest their beliefs in worship, teaching, practice and observance" are now overridden by the "rights and freedoms of others" not to hear and not to allow to be said or written even the words of the Bible which they find distasteful, hateful or allegedly cause them harm. Christians cannot express truths regarding the unborn, biological sex, marriage or what the Bible says is sinful without coming under attack.

We need to put on the armour of Christ, and ask for Holy Spirit inspiration and protection, remembering always that Jesus is with us wherever we are.

Let's pray.