

Messy Church, Part 1: Messy City

Acts 18:1-11

Today we are beginning a new series from 1 Corinthians. My plan is that between now and July I preach through the first six chapters of this letter, then we take a break, and next January pick it up again and preach through the rest of the book.

Today we are going to start the series in Acts, with the account of Paul's time in Corinth. We will look at the reality of what the city was like; Paul's response to the city; and how our year is going to shape up at Gateway, especially with us moving to two meetings from next Sunday.

Acts 18:1

Paul had been in Athens, the high centre of Greek learning. But Athens was a shell of a city, where nothing was produced or achieved or done (see Acts 17:21). Corinth was about 50 miles from Athens and Paul would have walked there, a journey of two days.

Paul probably arrived in Corinth in the March of 50AD (only about 15 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus) and he stayed there till September 51.

Corinth was a big city of possibly 750,000 people, half of whom would have been slaves. It was an interesting and important city, situated on an isthmus with two harbours, one facing Italy, and the other facing Asia. Sailing around the Peloponnese was a long and dangerous voyage, so cargo (and even small ships) was carried over the *diolkos*, a four mile long paved road between the two harbours. In ancient times attempts were made to build a canal across this isthmus, with Nero using 6,000 Jewish prisoners of war to do so, but it was not until 1881 that a canal was finally built.

Corinth had great natural resources, with plentiful supplies of fresh water, and clay. At this time it was the largest city in Greece, but it had a troubled history...

Corinth was part of the Achaean league, which declared war on Sparta. Sparta was in alliance with Rome and the Roman general Lucius Mummius annihilated the Achaeans in 146BC. Corinth, as head of the league, was destroyed. Then, in 44BC, Julius Caesar refounded the city as a *Roman* colony, populating it with freedmen, veterans of his army, and urban tradesmen and labourers. The success of the city was guaranteed by its position, and its attitude was Roman, self-sufficient, and commercial.

Corinth was dominated by the 574m high Acrocorinth (twice the height of the Eiffel Tower). On top of this rocky outcrop was the Temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love. Excavations of the Temple of Asclepius (the god of healing) have found many terracotta votaries of body parts, left there in supplication for healing. These include many models of human genitals, presumably because of the high incidence of venereal disease in this sexually corrupt city. Temple dining clubs were an important feature of the social and cultural life of the city, and an issue that Paul has to address in his letter to the Corinthian church.

Corinth was also host to the biennial Isthmian Games, which were among the most important in the Greek speaking world. Corinth was a holiday destination, where people came to have fun. It was cosmopolitan and pluralistic, and if Athens was like contemporary Oxford, Corinth was more like LA or Johannesburg. It was big, brash, and multicultural. It was a self-made city, with self-made attitudes. Corinthians were

very status aware, and the rich were largely nouveau riche, with all the OTT behaviour and social chip on the shoulder that implies. In many ways, it was Chav City!

So although we are talking about an ancient city, Corinth was in many ways a very postmodern city, with a great many similarities with our own culture. Our emphasis upon sport, and sex, and commerce, and celebrity would all have felt very familiar to the Corinthians, which is why Paul's letter to the Corinthians has so much relevance to us.

Acts 18:2-4

Once in Corinth, Paul hooked up with Aquila and Priscilla, who were from Pontus, on the Black Sea coast, but had been in Rome until the emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from the imperial city. Corinth was the kind of place that attracted refugees.

Along with Aquila & Priscilla, Paul did manual labour. This was significant, in a city where appearance mattered, and where philosophers (the Max Clifford's of their age) were meant to live by patronage, spinning a positive line for their patrons. Paul's choice of work was provocative and evidently caused upset in the church, but it meant he could support himself, and gave him opportunity for witness. However, Saturdays were given over exclusively to preaching.

Acts 18:5-11

Once Paul's mates Silas & Timothy arrived in town it appears he gave himself to preaching full-time, and in this met with a mixture of success and failure. Although Paul – as was his normal practice – began with the Jews, he was not generally successful with them, although the leader of the synagogue was converted. In the middle of this mix of success and failure Paul had a vision, in which God spoke great assurance to him – presumably because he was in particular need of encouragement at the time; and in his 18 months in the city, Paul built a church.

The letter of 1 Corinthians itself was written from Ephesus (see 1 Cor 16:8); probably about three years after Paul had left Corinth. It didn't take long for the church to become messy, for it to start to reflect the city more than the cross. Paul's ministry in Corinth had been all about the cross (see 1 Cor 2:2) and in his letter he keeps coming back to the cross. What Corinth needed was the cross. It was by the cross that something beautiful could be built out of the mess. The cross was the most important message in Corinth. It mattered more than commerce, or status, or sport, or sex.

What we learn from Paul

In going to Corinth Paul didn't escape to the country. Rather he went to the place that might seem most hostile to a Christian. He was not afraid to defy convention (for example, by working as a tent maker), and he was not afraid of direct talk ("Your blood be on your own heads!"). He was also ever alert to the Spirit, which meant he was receptive to a vision from God. And Paul had belief in God and the power of the cross even when the results of his preaching seemed to be mixed.

How this applies to Gateway church in 2010...

I want us to have an expectation of growth! God spoke to Paul that he had "many people" in Corinth, and we need to believe that the same is true in Poole and Bournemouth. Clearly, this word was specific to Paul, at this time, and in this place, but biblical prophecy always has a wider meaning, and at the least we can prayer this vision back to God, asking, "Please, would there be many people in Poole and Bournemouth who you call as your own, just as you did in Corinth."

Since July Gateway has been growing in comparison with the previous year, and at our biggest Sunday last year there were 271 people. This year, I am praying that we start to gather 300 people on our biggest Sundays. Going to two services means that we can accommodate this number of people, as we will have the physical space to grow.

Of course, there is pain in going to two meetings. It means that we won't all be together on Sundays. It is going to disrupt us all as we will all have to come to church at a time different from what we are used to. On a cold winters day we might think it is madness to be running a meeting at 9am! But there is also great potential! It means we have the potential to grow, and it also means that there is greater flexibility for people. In the summer you can come to the 9am service, and be on the beach by 11. Or you can have a lie-in, and still make it to church for the 11am service.

Running two meetings will also require more people to serve. An important emphasis of 1 Corinthians is that the church is a body in which ever member is called to fulfil its part. By going to two meetings our hope is that the body will more fully fulfil its function.

In 2010 lets be a church that keeps the cross central to all we do, and build something beautiful in the midst of a messy culture.