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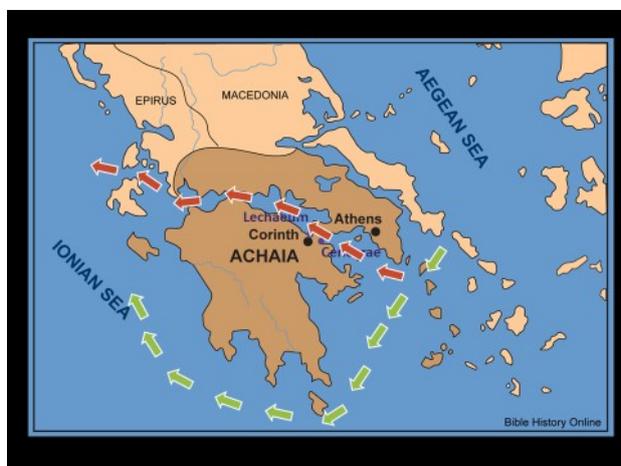
2 Corinthians 4.5-12

Treasure in Jars of Clay

Over the next four weeks we are going to be looking at passages from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. So this week I want to offer some background to the city of Corinth and Paul's relationship with the church there.

First of all some geography.

Corinth is set in southern Greece in what was then the Roman province of Achaia.



It was located near to a narrow isthmus of land – less than four miles wide – which connected the Aegean Sea to the Ionian Sea and onto the Adriatic.

Because the sea route around the bottom of the Peloponnese could be hazardous a lot of cargo was taken overland across this strip of land to be shipped on from the other side.

This meant that Corinth was on a major trade route between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean, and so was a city of considerable wealth.

As to its history, Corinth had been totally destroyed by the Romans in 146BC, in their war with the Greeks. It was left abandoned for just over 100 years. In 44 BC Julius Caesar decided to rebuild Corinth, and it was established as a Roman colony. It was settled mainly by 'freedmen' largely, initially, from Italy, but also from all over the Roman empire.

Freedmen were people who had been in slavery, but had either been able to purchase their freedom, or had been granted their freedom by grateful masters. Often they were slaves who were in senior positions in households, and were extremely able people. Having been granted their freedom they would establish businesses or trades of their own and would begin to run their own households, with slaves and servants of their own.

By the middle of the first century, when the apostle Paul arrived some estimate that there were as many as 500,000 people living in and around Corinth – the third largest city in the Roman empire after Rome and Alexandria.

This was a city that grew very rapidly over this one hundred years, and was a place where people came to make a new life for themselves. It was a city of opportunity, and a city that new success. This was a city for the upwardly mobile.

It was also a deeply religious city, with a large number of temples worshipping gods that find their origins all across the empire. It was a multi-faith and multi-cultural city.

There have been at least 26 different temples identified in the ruins of Corinth including a huge temple to Apollo, a temple to Asclepius, the god of healing, a temple focussing on the imperial cult, and overlooking the city on the Acro-Corinth, a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

It was this temple that, during the Greek empire, gave the city a reputation for immorality. One writer at the time suggested that there were over a thousand temple prostitutes in the city connected to the cult of Aphrodite, and Corinth became a byword for sexual immorality.

Among the different religious groups there was a sizeable Jewish community with its own synagogue for worship.

It was in this synagogue that the apostle Paul began his work in the church in around 50 AD.

When Paul arrived in the city he met up with two Christians who were already in Corinth, having been forced out of Rome by order of the emperor Claudius in 49 AD – Aquila and Priscilla.

They, like Paul, were tentmakers by trade, and so Paul went into business with them.

He began his work of sharing the Christian faith by teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, trying to persuade his fellow Jews that Jesus, who had been crucified and who had risen from the dead, was God's Messiah.

However, Paul was forced to leave the synagogue ... but (probably much to the annoyance of the members of the synagogue) he began to meet in the home of Titius Justus – just next door to the synagogue!

Paul then stayed on in Corinth for nearly two years, bringing people to faith in Jesus and establishing the church. But then Paul moves on.

However, after Paul moves on from Corinth, he hears that some difficulties have arisen in Corinth and eventually, in about 55 AD he writes to them to try to help them to sort out their difficulties. This is the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians.

He addresses three issues:

- Division
- Sexual immorality
- Some odd ideas about resurrection

It's hardly surprising that these issues should have arisen in Corinth. Corinth was a hugely diverse city and the new Christian community would have represented all of that diversity. It is no surprise that they should have struggled with factionalism.

Nor was it surprising that they should have people in the church who had a variety of views about appropriate sexual conduct, given the nature of Corinth. They would have brought these issues into the church from their background.

And also, with the plethora of different religious ideas being shared in Corinth, it is no surprise that people would have had a variety of view about what the Christian message is actually about.

But after this first letter it appears that things get even worse. It is clear that Paul had to write to them again ... but this letter has not survived. What we do know about it is that it was a severe letter. Paul had had to try to put them right on something quite serious.

And it is also clear that Paul visited them to try to sort out this problem ... but that the visit was pretty disastrous. It seems that they didn't want to hear what Paul had to say, and he was not made particularly welcome.

What seems to have happened is that a new set of leaders have turned up in Corinth – possibly from Jerusalem – certainly Jewish Christians. And they have called into question Paul's authority and credentials as an apostle.

- He was not 'eloquent' enough
- He was not 'successful' enough
- He was not 'powerful' enough

And again, you can imagine all of these ideas taking root in a place like Corinth. This was a place for successful, upwardly mobile people. They knew what it was that marked someone out as 'top of the pile' – they valued the marks of the 'true leader'.

And such a person would have been polished in their use of language and in building an argument. They would have thrived in everything that they did. And they would have had a presence and an authority that exuded 'power'.

But Paul didn't quite fit into these categories. He certainly knew how to talk and he could talk at great length ... but he wasn't the most eloquent of speakers.

And when it came to success he had something of a mixed record. He could fall out with people. He often attracted criticism and outright persecution. He had been beaten and flogged. He had spent time in prison. Along with his success there were plenty of signs of apparent failure. He didn't quite hit the mark for these success-oriented Corinthians.

And it was the same when it came to his 'power'. There were certainly answers to prayer, and miracles had been associated with him But there could also be a gentleness and a humility about him ... he could see two sides of an argument ... he refused to ride rough-shod over the weak. He was not a typically 'powerful' personality.

And it is this that he addresses head on when he talks about having 'this treasure in jars of clay.'

He begins by reminding his listeners that if we have anything to offer one another as followers of Jesus it is not anything to do with our own personal qualities, it is because we point to Jesus:

"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

Paul's focus had never been on presenting himself, but on presenting Jesus. And he is presumably having a subtle dig at those new leaders in the church who were much more about 'preaching themselves', and stressing their own

credentials and their own powers, rather than pointing beyond themselves to Jesus.

Paul makes it clear that if we have anything to offer it is only the treasure of the gospel that we hold in our jars of clay. What we have to offer to others is the light of God's love shining in our hearts – 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.'

And the light of God's love shines the more brightly through us when we recognise that we are no more than jars of clay – when we allow God to shine through our ordinary, everyday, breakable lives ... because what is important is that "this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

So Paul is not at all ashamed of the fact that his life has not always borne the marks of success and that he has not always exuded power. Weakness has been very much a part and parcel of his life as a follower of Jesus.

To the point where he can say that he has been 'hard-pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.'

And it is not just that God chooses and calls ordinary, broken and fragile people – there is something here that is intrinsically related to the God whom we serve – the God whose light has shone through the crucified and risen Jesus.

Weakness and brokenness are the marks of the way in which God works in the world to transform the world through love.

And Paul expresses this vividly here by talking about carrying around in our bodies the death of Jesus in order that others may know the life of Jesus.

Here is a profound challenge to the attitude of the new leaders in the church in Corinth, who were winning over the Christians there with their message that emphasised their own power and authority, that fed into the upwardly mobile, success-driven ethos of the city ... but which missed the point of following a crucified and risen Lord.

We have this treasure in jars of clay.