

2023-09-10 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Canon William Price
Trinity XIII
2 Kings 6:24 – 25 and 7:3 – end; Acts 18: 1 - 16

I sometimes wonder how the minds work of the people who choose the Bible readings in services, and more to the point why they selected that first lesson this evening. There are hundreds of edifying and uplifting passages in the Old Testament, but I find little edifying in that long reading (2 Kings, chapter 6, verses 24-25 and chapter 7, verses 3-end).

The King of Aram's army besieges Samaria so that people resort to cannibalism to survive. Four lepers enter the Aramean camp and find it deserted. The Arameans have fled because God made them imagine that there was a great army nearby able to defeat them. The lepers tell the King of Israel who fears a ruse by the Syrians to tempt the Israelites out of the city, but in fact the Arameans have indeed fled, and the siege is lifted. One key part of the story is omitted. The captain had doubted the prophet Elisha's word that the siege would be lifted, and for his audacity in doubting the prophet he was trampled on by the crowd and died. Our conclusion might be that God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

The second reading (Acts, chapter 18, verses 1-16) offers more food for thought. St Paul had been in Athens, where his preaching had been received politely, but where he made few converts to Christianity. So he left Athens with the wind completely out of his sails, a discouraged and disappointed man. That feeling is surely something with which we can identify, at least from time to time.

And so he went to Corinth. One writer has said that to leave Athens and go to Corinth was like moving from Cambridge to Manchester. Athens was a university town, Corinth was the great commercial metropolis. It was seaport of half a million people – really huge for that time - about 50 miles from Athens. It had a large Jewish colony and a cosmopolitan population. Corinth also had a reputation as a wicked place. Someone said that if you could start a church in Corinth you could start a church anywhere.

So Paul came to Corinth at the beginning of the year 50 AD, upset from his experience in Athens and as he wrote himself he came to Athens **'in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling'**. How human he was! He found work with a Jewish couple called Aquila and Priscilla. The couple had themselves recently arrived in Corinth, having been expelled from Rome when the Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from the city. Their work was tent making, as was Paul's, so in modern church language we could call Paul a non-stipendiary minister. He was not paid for his preaching. But every Sabbath he was at the synagogue, doing his best to convince both Jews and Gentiles, non-Jews, about Jesus.

Then two of his friends, Silas and Timothy, arrived in Corinth from Macedonia, and Paul was greatly cheered by their good reports of how the church in Macedonia was growing. This gave him renewed confidence, and reminds us of how we can encourage and strengthen each other in times of despondency. Now Paul was able to give all his time to preaching and teaching, doing everything he could to persuade the Jews that Jesus was in fact the Son of God, God's Messiah, the Saviour of all people.

But, alas, Paul met with much opposition from the Jews in Corinth. All they did was argue contentiously and contradict him at every turn. In the end Paul had finally had enough of them and gave up trying to convert them as a hopeless job. But he didn't give up on Jesus and settle back to a quiet job making tents. To paraphrase, he said to the Jews **'Have it your way, then. You've PTO**

made your bed. Now lie in it. From now on I'm spending my time with the other nations'. Or in the dramatic language of the Bible **'Your blood be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'**. He'd actually said this very strongly earlier (Acts, chapter 13, verse 46) to the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia: **'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles'**.

Then Paul left the house of Aquila and Priscilla, although they remained friends, and went to live with a Gentile, Titius Justus, who had earlier attended the synagogue as a God fearing Gentile and whose house was next door to the synagogue. The Christian cause prospered and the church in Titius's house grew. One notable convert was the ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, and he and his whole family became Christians. So Paul's efforts with the Jews in Corinth were not a complete failure, and many others were baptized.

Paul was strengthened by a dream in which Jesus told him not to be intimidated or silenced because he was with him and no one would be able to hurt him. Jesus added that Paul had no idea how many people were on Jesus's side in Corinth. That was all Paul needed to know, and he stayed in Corinth for another 18 months, faithfully teaching the word of God to the Corinthians.

But then when Gallio was governor of the province the Jews got up a campaign against Paul, took him into court, and made accusations that he was preaching an illegal religion. When Paul was about to defend himself, Gallio said to the Jews: *'If this was just a matter of criminal conduct, I would gladly hear you out. But it sounds to me like one more Jewish squabble, another of your hair-splitting quarrels over religion. Take care of it in your own time. I can't be bothered with your nonsense'*. He cleared them out of the courtroom.

What can we learn from this account? First, Paul was so discouraged after his apparent failure in Athens, but his friends cheered him up with good news from Macedonia, and Jesus, in a vision, encouraged him by telling him that many people in Corinth were on Jesus's side. Life is full of ups and downs, and downs and ups. Keep going! Paul did, and stayed in Corinth for eighteen months. Second, Paul was able to change the details of his plans from what he was doing as he taught about Jesus. The Jews wouldn't listen, so he turned to the Gentiles. Perhaps sometimes if we feel that we are getting nowhere we need to think again, not to give up, but to move in a different direction. That might have implications for our Christian witness here, to honour the past while seeking a new way forward.

William Price