Lent 3 Corinth the City

The ancient city of Corinth sits on the narrow neck of land between the Greek mainland and the bulbous peninsular known as the Peloponnese. Today the ancient city of Paul’s time which was on the sea is now a bit inland because of nineteen hundred years of coastal changes. In the centuries before Jesus, the city was the border between the Spartans and the Atheneans and for hundreds of years they fought the Peloponnesian war.

At its narrowest point the neck of land is just six kilometres wide. In ancient times traders and sailors from all over the known world sailed to one side of the isthmus, unloaded goods and carted them across the gap to be loaded onto other ships on the other side. This saved many days of dangerous sailing and they reached their destination much faster. Shortcuts are useful. Merchants and sailors and the city fathers in Paul’s time dreamed of cutting a channel right across the six kilometres to enable ships to sail from the Mediterranean Sea to the Aegean Sea and a hundred years ago it actually happened.

Because of it’s location it was an international town in Paul’s time. Every imaginable language, custom and religion found it’s way to Corinth. Being an ancient Greek city state there was also a tradition of wisdom and civic pride that is evidenced today in the ruins of many fine buildings. In the town square many people stood up to champion their views on politics, current affairs, God and religion. It was a bit like speaker’s corner in Hyde Park in London. We can only imagine how unimpressive Paul must have seemed to the locals when he stood in the Corinth version of speaker’s corner to share his ideas and God and life.

So, what did Paul have to say to the people of Corinth in the Acts of the Apostles and in his two letters to the local church?

Paul remained in the city for eighteen months, staying with friends and fellow believers. He started sharing the Good News firstly with the Jews but then, when his message was rejected, he shared the message about Jesus as Messiah with everyone. As usual he had a tough time.

Paul’s basic message to the people in the church was a message about the issue of power and wisdom. This was especially relevant in a cultural context that valued wisdom and was daily confronted with power in many forms. The citizens were only too familiar with military power because of the Greek, Roman and Persian armies that fought one another consistently in the local area. They were well aware of economic power because the wealth of many nations passed through port and was sold in their local shops. Political and intellectual influence was evident everywhere and worldly power was presented as the normal way of things.

So it is that in chapter one of his first letter to the Corinthian church Paul decides that he must remind his fellow believers that real power, ultimate power belongs to God. God’s power is demonstrated in the cross, where God defeated evil powers, the power of sin and death. He also reminded them that God’s wisdom was greater than the world’s wisdom. There were any number of local philosophers for believers to listen to, but real wisdom was demonstrated in the way that God had acted in response to the world’s pain, sadness, despair and alienation.

Paul’s words about power remind us of the words of Jesus on the same subject. Jesus said that he came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. This is God’s way, the way of love, service and humility. It was the way that led to the cross. Paul emphasises too that the message he preached had an intrinsic power. The truth he spoke did not depend on his ability as a public speaker, and from all accounts, public speaking wasn’t his forte. Paul was not in the same league as the great orators like John Wesley, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King. The focus had to be on the message of Jesus and the cross, not on his ability to speak.

What does this say for us in the middle of Lent?

We are in a not dissimilar situation to the ordinary folk of ancient Corinth. We are daily confronted with the evidence and presence of great power and wealth. There is no shortage today of great persuasive political speakers. There are lots of very spectacular tele-evangelists and huge Pentecostal churches that make our Anglican worship seen pretty pedestrian and anything was exciting and attractive. Take heart, because Paul and the Corinthian believers faced it all before us.

Our call is to follow Jesus by daily taking up our cross, and the cross of Christ is the final and clearest word on power and wisdom. Some people may laugh at us for having faith in God when so many around us claim that there is no God. Athiesm and doubt are rampant in Australia but then again, so is selfishness and sadness. There has never been a time when faith and morality are as threatened and ridiculed as they are today; there has never however been a time when the need to give people purpose, hope and love has been greater. Too often today young people see only selfishness and indifference about them; too easily they resort to binge drinking and see suicide as a first option to solve the problem of pain.

As we head towards the cross of Good Friday we are keeping our eyes firmly on the source and symbol of real power, hope and common sense. We are looking to the cross for answers to the questions that everyone asks about human life and purpose.