

Bibliophile #5

Paul's letters to the church at Corinth

Over the last several weeks our readings from the New Testament have included extracts from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. This epistle has some of Paul's finest expressions of faith: so many people have been married to his great hymn of love (found at chapter 13); in its commissioning services the Uniting Church likes to make use of how there is one Spirit but many gifts; and then there is the way in which Paul speaks of how of how one part of the body is connected to another part of the body – and thus we are the body of Christ.

We make a great deal of use of this epistle in the life of the church. We do so often unaware of the reasons for why Paul was writing and how one part of the letter connects with another. The fact of the matter is that, in some respects, this church is in a mess. There are many divisions; there is some confusion over what the body of Christ believes, especially in matters of baptism, resurrection, and the spiritual life. And that is not to mention sexual immorality. If there were not so many things not quite right, then we would not have this letter today and, indeed, it would not have been written.

It seems as of the leaders in the church at Corinth had written to Paul requesting advice. The letter bears the name of Paul and Sosthenes. We do not know who Sosthenes was- he may have been Paul's scribe.

Those who know how to read between the lines believe that Paul may have written not two letters to the church at Corinth, but maybe five. It seems as if the situation in Corinth required Paul to make 'a painful visit' to the church. It is thought that this correspondence comes from around about 53-54AD. Paul had founded this church several years before (50AD?) at the completion of his second missionary journey.

The city was well placed on a narrow isthmus at the foot of Greece. It had two harbours. It had been one of the largest cities in ancient Greece (maybe 90,000 people). The Romans had destroyed the city and then rebuilt it a couple of centuries before Paul wrote his letters. It had become the provincial capital of Greece. Its population was a mix of Romans, Greeks and Jews. It was noted for a temple to Aphrodite (the goddess of love).

The letter follows the stock pattern of a letter written in Greek at the time. It begins with a greeting where Paul puts his name down first and then defines the authority for why he is writing; then come the names of the addresses – that is the church in Corinth and a greeting which is bicultural: grace is the Greek greeting, and peace is the Jewish.

Paul then follows the convention of giving thanks for something about those to whom he is writing. Here he gives thanks to God which is a sign of the way in which he 'Christianizes' the custom of letter writing in his day. Once these formalities have been attended to, Paul then sets out the reason for why he is writing: that is then followed by an exhortation where he urges the members of the church to live in a way that imitates Christ. The letter concludes with some greetings to members of the church he knows and a benediction. Almost all of Paul's letters follow this pattern.

Clive Pearson

inSpire

inSpire our life together in Christ:

May this place of worship

be a source of welcome

established in the hospitality of Christ.

inSpire our life together in Christ:

May this place of gathering

on a site of gathering over thousands of years

be one where we honour the past

and encourage visions of the future.

inSpire our life together in Christ:

May these communities of faith

endeavour to act justly, love kindness,

and walk humbly with God

for the sake of the common good.

inSpire our life together in Christ:

May this place follow the way of Christ

and be a nurturing place of forgiveness, mercy, compassion,

reconciliation, love, friendship and grace.

inSpire our life together in Christ:

May this place of life and witness

be a place which is open to God's to future.

May we seek to live in the light of Christ.