



# loretonormanhurst

## *The passion of Paul*

Last year I travelled to Turkey, Greece and Rome, 'in the steps of St Paul', the man we are familiar with through his letters in the New Testament and the accounts of his journeys, preaching and tribulations in The Acts of the Apostles. An enigmatic figure, Paul, the fervent Pharisee who in the first few decades after the death of Jesus persecuted those followers of the Way of Jesus with great vehemence, determined to rid the earth of that 'scourge'. And then, something happened, and with even greater passion he set out to spread the message about the One who had so profoundly entered and changed his life. As I travelled from place to place, delighting in being in Ephesus, Corinth, Thessaloniki, Philippi, Rome, all those places where early Christian communities formed and to whom Paul wrote, I became increasingly fascinated by Paul the man. What drew me in? His passion, dedication, fervour. He was both drawn and driven to spread the word of Jesus and the word **about** Jesus. He did that tirelessly and often at great personal cost. And remarkably, he did it in an extraordinary setting - in the mighty Roman Empire of the first century CE. He was attacked, hounded out of towns, vilified, imprisoned, persecuted. And he was welcomed too. His message touched hearts, his passion was contagious, and so the good news spread. He inspired conversion, he taught, he reasoned and he scolded. He counselled, he wrote letters imploring the new communities to live in a manner worthy of this good news, and he developed Christian theology. His letters, written in the 50s are the earliest Christian writings - the Gospels only appeared later. He made bold declarations about who Jesus is. His words are beautiful! But he wrote within the context of his day for he was a man of his time, and so in his letters we also find statements and counsel that jar the modern understanding of issues such as gender equity. In the first century Paul was both loved and hated. And perhaps that is still true today.

In the mid first century, Paul went to Ephesus. Ephesus, close to the modern town of Selcuk, is on the west coast of Turkey. In Paul's day Ephesus was a busy city port, a city of the powerful Roman Empire. And it must have been marvellous! The ancient ruins of Ephesus are stunning. A pagan city, a place of merchants and trade, of noise and business deals, of market place chaos and cultural mix as the ships sailed in and out. I wonder what they made of Paul. What did those Ephesians think? What did they make of his message of a crucified Lord, those pagan merchants? For Paul told a story of self-emptying, a story of forgiveness, of humility, of putting the other first. How strange did that all sound to their ears? A Lord whose glory is revealed through a humiliating death as a criminal! Beaten by the might of the Roman authority. The very same power that ruled in Ephesus. No wonder there is passion in Paul's letters to the people of Ephesus! But there he ran into trouble with the pagan Ephesians and had to leave. That certainly wasn't the only time that happened to Paul! And after leaving each place he went to the next and began again. The passion of Paul!

Why was Paul chased out of the places he preached in? To understand Paul we must remember the Roman context of the beginnings of Christianity. The grandeur of Roman culture, architecture, cities, achievements. Their religious system. Roman religion was pagan. They worshipped a number of deities and the Roman emperors themselves were considered divine – they were called 'sons of god'. The Romans persecuted those early Christians for they saw their monotheism as a threat to their polytheistic system. However, it is interesting that they didn't persecute the Jews. Why not? The Jews were traders and merchants who brought revenue into the Roman towns and cities and

the Romans taxed them. Therefore they tolerated them. The Romans always allowed occupied people to continue worshipping their gods with the condition that they add worship of the Roman Emperor to that. The Jews, however, with their monotheistic religion, were exempted from Emperor worship because their ethical and moral systems were held in such esteem. The Romans did not take on any of their rituals and laws such as kosher rules, but respected their ethics and their way of treating people. At that time, the followers of Jesus were still well and truly within the fold of Judaism. They were Jews, following the Way of the Jew, Jesus. However, Paul's preaching at Corinth was a turning point for those early Christians. The exemption from Emperor worship and freedom from persecution for the Jews changed. The Romans didn't like that Paul was threatening their customs. Some of the Jews too who didn't like what he was saying complained about him to the Roman authorities. The Romans would not have been interested in inter-religious disagreement but they did respond to the concerns that he was threatening their customs.

The first century Roman world was a context of power and influence. We can only marvel at the sheer magnificence of their technology, their well-designed, ordered, functioning cities. And they were very concerned with keeping order. Into that world came Jesus. And into that world came those early converts and Paul and the Church Fathers and Mothers. Imagine the daring of being baptized, of becoming part of this little group in such a context. What courage was needed! It was not for the faint-hearted. But these people were baptised in the Holy Spirit, into the power of the risen Lord. They were baptised into courage, joy, passion and life.

Paul spent two years in Ephesus. Old Ephesus is truly amazing. The theatre could hold 24 000 people. As I wandered through the streets and stood in that remarkable theatre, I imagined Paul there speaking to the crowds. Tradition has it that Paul was not an attractive man. In the apocryphal work, The Acts of Paul and Thecla (apocryphal meaning that it is an early Christian text but is not included in our Bible), we find the following description of Paul: "At length they saw a man coming (namely Paul), of a small stature with meeting eyebrows, bald head, bow-legged, strongly built, hollow-eyed, with a large crooked nose". But we are also told: "he was full of grace, for sometimes he appeared as a man, sometimes he had the countenance of an angel". Paul was a master with words! The power of Paul's preaching lay in his argument. He used reason and logic to make his points. People may not have liked him or found him attractive but they could not disagree with him, such was the power of his argument. Those that were seduced by his words and the power of the message he spread, gave their hearts and their lives to it. And those that were not, those that were threatened by his message, drove him out of the towns and cities. In the Acts of the Apostles (a Christian text, written by the Gospel writer, Luke, which is included in our Bible), we have the account of Paul being chased out of Ephesus. Why? The Ephesians did not like his claim that their gods were not real, especially the cult of Artemis that brought so much trade and revenue to Ephesus. He was threatening the system which worked so well, kept order and which brought in no small profit. The Roman authorities and merchants wanted him out. "When they heard this they were enraged and shouted, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! The city was filled with the confusion: and people rushed together to the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travelling companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theatre. Meanwhile some were shouting one thing, some

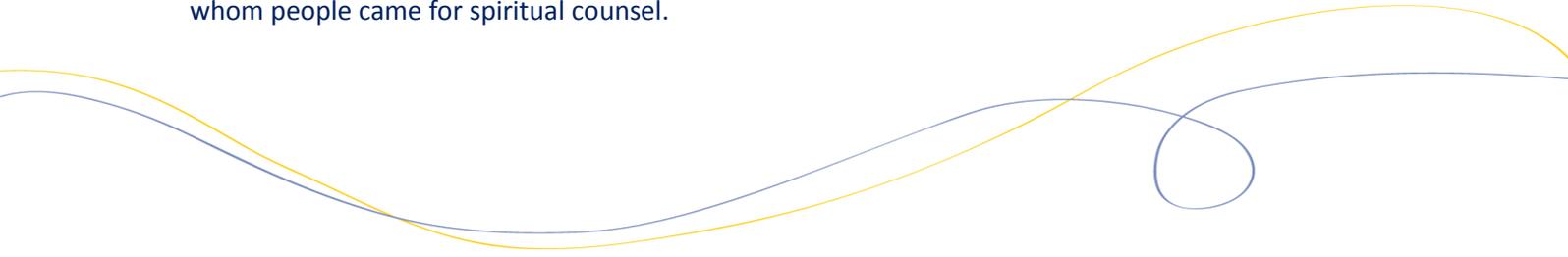


another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (Acts of the Apostles, chapter 19). Such was the effect of Paul!

It was a hot sunny afternoon in Ephesus and we sat under a tree in the heat, with the crowds streaming past and the chaos. Just as it would have been in the busy and chaotic Agora (marketplace) near the theatre where Paul preached. And we listened to the story in Acts, chapter 19. I found it moving. The courage of this man Paul in the face of the anger, hostility and ridicule of the crowds. Paul was on fire with the mission to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. That was his passion, that fire in the belly! “Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power”, he wrote. “Although I am the very least of the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians 3:7-10). That fire in the belly often meant death. Not only was there danger for Paul, but danger too for those in whose hearts the message took root.

Modern day Izmir, the ancient city of Smyrna, is on the Aegean coast of Turkey, and early one morning a small group of us attended Mass at the Santa Maria church, a beautiful little Franciscan church built in 1692. It is one of the few Catholic churches in Izmir. An African Franciscan priest was waiting for us at the door and we were gently ushered in. As we sat down and the Mass began I imagined myself back in the days of Paul, as one of those early followers of Jesus (the name ‘Christians’ was only used at the end of the first century) during that time of persecution. With such thoughts filling my mind the poignancy of the Mass was tangible and the words of consecration touched me in a very special way: “This is my body, given up for you. Take and eat”. In its developing form at that time, the story of Jesus’ outpouring of love would have been remembered. Those early communities used to gather in houses to remember Jesus, to do what he had done, to share a meal, to tell the story of his self-giving love. And in that context those words would have very powerfully pointed to death on the cross: “This is my body, given up for you”. What might that mean for those early followers of the Way of Jesus? The very real possibility of death, certainly, just as had happened to him. What poignancy to the words in that setting. What a call to give one’s all. This ‘new way’ that we are so familiar with today, to follow this Lord, to do the same, what might it call me to? And again and again, we are invited to hold out our hands, to take and eat, to surrender to the invitation. At the end of the Mass, the priest chanted the *Salve Regina*. And it reminded me that Beauty is imperishable. Beauty draws us to the Holy, speaks to us of the Divine. And in those simple words that we are asked to slip into, we too are drawn toward and into Holiness.

The message and the passion of Paul enflamed hearts. It changed lives. And that is what happened to a young woman named Thecla. Thecla, we might say, was a feminist, out of time and place. She broke free of the conventions of her day. Thecla was eighteen years old when she encountered Paul. She was rich and was about to be married. Then she heard Paul preaching. Her heart was enflamed and she surrendered to Christ and followed Paul in his missionary travels. There are many legends about Thecla being thrown to lions and being consigned to burn in fire for having insulted her suitors by refusing to marry them, and for daring to follow where her heart led her. Legend says she escaped and lived to the ripe old age of ninety, a holy woman of devotion, prayer and wisdom, to whom people came for spiritual counsel.



And then there was Lydia. Lydia lived in Philippi, originally called Neapolis, in eastern Macedonia. There is a spring there and a church, the Baptistery of Saint Lydia. We sat there under the trees next to the spring and listened to the story of Lydia which we find in The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 16. Paul's custom when he arrived in a new town was to go to the synagogue. He knew he would find Jews there and he would go into the synagogue to preach. But there was no synagogue in Philippi. So on the Sabbath, Paul sought out the Jews. Looking for a Sabbath worship gathering, he found a group of women praying at this spring. Lydia was among them and she immediately opened her heart to what Paul was saying and she and her household were baptized. Lydia was a wealthy woman, a business woman who dealt in purple cloth - the Gucci of the day! Hers is a moving story of a woman who listened. She heard, responded, changed. She opened her heart.

Paul's passion was such that he didn't mind if he upset anyone. What mattered was speaking the word of Jesus and speaking about Jesus. He did this from first-hand experience. He knew the power of the risen Christ to touch and transform. It was no mere theory or hearsay for Paul. It is important to remember that Paul was a Jew - as was Jesus, and as were the early followers of Jesus. It was only much later, towards the end of the first century that the new movement split from Judaism. Paul did not convert, he remained a Jew, a Jew whose life had been profoundly touched by the risen Christ. Paul saw the story of Jesus not as a break with the Jewish past, but as the completion of the Jewish story. As a Pharisee he knew the Jewish story well and lived it. And to Paul, the story of Jesus is God's completion of this story. So Paul preached as a Jew. Paul, the master of rhetoric, always argued from Scripture, and that Scripture was the Hebrew Scriptures. He argued from that and interpreted it. But instead of interpreting Scripture as a Pharisee as he had previously done, he now interpreted it in light of the Jesus story and as a message to the Gentiles, not just for Jews. In fact this was true to the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, for example, there is mention of the Jews being 'a light to the nations'. So Paul took the message of Jesus to the Gentiles and in doing that he was fulfilling the message of the prophets. Paul was impelled by the love of Christ. His theology was based on reason, argument that was logical and clear. Even those who did not accept his end position had to accept his argument. It was convincing and reasoned.

Paul set out from Troas, a city in the north-west of Asia Minor, now Turkey, and sailed to Ephesus, then to Samos, to Philippi, Berea, Athens and Corinth. As he travelled he moved ever more deeply into the Greek world. He was constantly moving out in circles from Jerusalem. His intention was to get to Rome, to the heart of the Roman world. Unlike Jesus who preached and healed in the villages of Galilee, Paul went to the cities, to the rich leaders, to the powerful. He went to the seats of power and aimed his preaching at them. If you reach the leaders you reach the people too, was his thinking. He was fearless, direct, passionate and courageous. What had happened to Paul to make him that way? Perhaps he was already like that. He had shown those characteristics in his zeal for Judaism and his punishment of anyone who disturbed this and preached what he called nonsense about a man who had risen from the dead. And then we see that same zeal and passion for Jesus. Paul never knew Jesus himself. His experience was of the risen Christ. In other words, Paul encountered Love, the Mystery at the heart of everything, the Mystery Jesus himself knew and had lived in and lived into, and had died into too. This Love so profoundly entered Paul's very being that

he was later able to say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Acts of the Apostles). We might say, Love drew Paul in, and the veil fell from his eyes, and he saw anew.

Not only did Paul travel outwards from Jerusalem in a literal sense but theologically too. From local Jewish theology Paul developed his Christology as he encountered the Greek world. He interpreted the story of Jesus in terms of classical Greek philosophy and drew on those concepts as he answered the question, 'Who is Jesus'? "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus", he said, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Paul's Letter to the Philippians). This is one of the earliest written Christological statements. It is a statement about how Paul saw Jesus in the grand panorama of Life and Love, as a human being utterly surrendered to this Love and Life. And it is also a statement about who we are called to be. Jesus' spirit, love and prayer are poured into us too. The Christology we later find in the Gospels was being formed and spoken of in the various communities at that time, but only came into written form later in the first century. So not only physically in terms of his travel, but theologically too, Paul moved ever outwards from Jerusalem. He was not afraid to enter new worlds.

Late afternoon Mass in Thessaloniki in the Church of the Immaculate Conception was beautiful. The priest is from France and he has been there for four years. He spoke about Paul. He spoke of moments in his own life, when being in a different culture is difficult, and he said that thinking of Paul helps him get through those moments and be inspired. Paul too was in a different culture, with people who thought differently and had their own worldview and therefore ways of making sense of the world and how it works. Yet he continued to be effective, committed, passionate. The priest wished that we might be inspired, encouraged and strengthened by Paul on our journey.

What might we learn from Paul?

Paul, the passionate Jesus man, begins with 'something happened'. His change of name from Saul to Paul signifies the depth of this change. Name changes are a feature of biblical literature and point to the fact that the person concerned has encountered the Divine Presence in an utterly transformative way. Not only does it signify this change of heart, but it also points to a change of purpose, direction, mission. The heart change bears fruit in a task with which he or she is entrusted. Paul's story tells us that something happened to him while on the road to Damascus. An experience. An unveiling. A surrender to the Mystery of Love. For us, that may not necessarily be a one-off or dramatic experience. In fact, it needs to be rather, a gentle yet persistent experience over time. But the heart of this is that we are changed. We are affected. In that persistent Presence and encounter our hearts are opened. God works in us and upon us - and then through us. Our very being is shaped and formed in response. Our reality is moulded and becomes the place of God's self-disclosing to us. As it was for Paul, so it must be for us. An inside-out movement. A *metanoia* - an about-turn, a deeply felt conversion. Something happens and we set out like Paul to love and breathe this. Just as Paul set out to spread the word of Jesus and the word about Jesus to the Jews and to the pagan world, we may do the same. We may do this in many ways. By the way we live. By the work we do. By the choices we make and the words we speak. Yes, Paul was the great master of words and argument, but his life powerfully bore witness to that argument.



We are all called to the passion of Paul. This great man who walked the roads of ancient Turkey and Greece and Rome, who sailed the Aegean, who was respected and hated, welcomed into homes and chased out of cities, touched the hearts of many people, and still does. His passion has much to say to us.

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