

Trinity Sunday – Companions in Ministry

Acts 17 and 18

30th May 2010

Encounter @ 9, Equip @ 10.45

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Today we are continuing to look at the history of the early church through our reading of Acts. We have said before how good it has been to read large chunks for a change. I think it has been a great opportunity to look beyond the headlines if you like. Probably like me you are very familiar with some of the main characters in the story such as Peter, Paul, Timothy, Silas and Barnabas. You might call them the celebrities of the early church – although I am sure they would have hated being seen in that way. If we had been picking a shorter reading today we would probably have chosen the section about Paul in Athens.

Through looking at the bigger picture I think we get a better idea of what the early church was really like and how and why it grew and as we do so we become aware of some of the other people who also had a crucial role to play. Because if you think about it realistically there is no way that the church could have grown and established itself throughout the known world if it had been completely dependent on the Apostles. I know that we have read about many people, sometimes even thousands turning to Christ after listening to Peter and Paul speak but I don't think that was enough on its own. If we focus just on Paul, this week and last we have seen him visit a number of cities supported by Silas, Timothy and Barnabas – sometimes together and sometimes apart but very definitely reflecting our theme today as companions in ministry. But they could not do everything. Unlike today with all the media at our disposal when they were in Athens they could not readily communicate with

Ephesus, although Paul both in person and through his letters worked tirelessly to encourage and teach and minister to the new converts.

All this activity was crucial but I think it is only part of the story. There were also many others who had a role to play, even if they did not always make the headlines. We have some examples in today's reading. In chap 17 v 5 we hear about Jason, dragged before the city authorities because the Jews could not find Paul – accused of receiving Paul into his households. Social historians have shown that households were key to the spread of the gospel. Christians such as Jason and Titius Justus who is mentioned later allowed their extended households to become the hub of the church. They were centres where Christians could meet together and encourage one another – which I am sure was vital during times of persecution but also they were a witness to the wider community drawing others into a new way of living. Paul mentions several in his letters but I am sure there were many more who faithfully modelled the gospel when the big name speakers were not there.

In Corinth we meet the leaders of another household – Priscilla and Aquila- not only did they give hospitality to Paul but they also allowed him to work alongside them as they were tent makers like him. Corinth, like several of the places which Paul visited was on one of the main trade routes to Rome and it was common for tradesmen and craftsmen to stop off on their travels to sell goods to work alongside craftsmen in the different cities. As they worked together Christians could share the gospel and the tradesmen would take it on.

Priscilla and Aquila also had another important role to play – when they met Apollos they realised that he did not have a full understanding of the faith. In effect they mentored him and he became an important evangelist within the church.

We have heard about many others, named and unnamed who have played their part – ordinary people living out their lives, standing up for their faith and sharing the gospel, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide and prompt them. They were companions in ministry just as much as their more famous counterparts.

Actually I don't think things have changed much today. If you look at the history of the church in the 20th century there are many examples of evangelists who have had a powerful impact but I think they would be the first to recognise that their role is only part of the picture. I had the privilege for a time to worship in the church where David Watson was minister. He led many missions all over Britain – he was very clear that this was only part of the picture. The Holy Spirit blessed many of his gatherings but he recognised that local people living out their Christian lives was just as important if not more so. Just as in the early church we all have a role to play. Our households and the way we live as a church community mean that people can see the good news being lived out. I don't think you can underestimate the importance of that at this time when so many are living fractured lives and we've seen examples here of damaged people finding a welcome and responding to God's love and care. We have a golden opportunity to introduce our neighbours, work colleagues and others we meet on a day by day basis to the only kind of life which has hope and real meaning. More than that we can further the kingdom by nurturing gifts in each other and encouraging people to grow in their faith as Priscilla and Aquila did. If that sounds a bit daunting we need to look again at the church we see in Acts and remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit who gave the members of those early Christians the boldness to speak out, the courage to face up to persecution and all the spiritual gifts they needed for their mission is still at work today and will supply us with all we need if only we will open ourselves to his guidance. In his letters Paul spoke

often about everyone having a part to play as Christ's body and we recognise that in our covenant.

all the people in the church are equal partners in the mission and ministry of the church.

When we work together we can achieve great things for God. Why is that? Well today is Trinity Sunday and I think that is at the root of the explanation. Why is teamwork best? Because we are creations of the triune God, made in his image. The Father, the Son and the Spirit have been working together for all eternity delighting in one another. They work in perfect unity and harmony and the joy of togetherness is in our very being too.

We are all companions in ministry so I would encourage you to be ready to listen for what God wants you to do. Several people have commented to me that they have found Acts to be really exciting to read – I think God wants us to experience the same excitement today.