

Paul ... and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy... grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1.1-3.

And so we end our long study of *Ephesians*. If you forget everything I ever said about this letter, remember this one thing, when you next despair at the war and strife, the pain and unfairness of the world: *Eph* reveals to us that God hasn't finished with the world yet. He has a plan, one day in his time, to join everything together in Jesus Christ. So let's pray for Christ's second coming soon: *maranatha*.

Now at the beginning of this New Year I want us to look at another letter of St Paul, 1 *Corinthians*. Corinth was a great sea port with an enormous population of around 500,000. Mainland Greece and the Peloponnese are connected by a thin piece of land. Corinth is situated on that isthmus on the trading routes by land north and south, and the sea routes east and west. The Romans made Corinth rather than Athens the capital of Achaean. Having gone to school in Dover, I know that busy port towns are places apart. They thrive on commerce, vice and drunkenness. Corinth 2000 years ago was no different.

All we schoolboys, tucked away safely on top of the cliffs of Dover, used knowingly to giggle at what you might find in the wonderfully named Snargate Street. High on the acropolis of Corinth was the great temple to Aphrodite (or Venus, as the Romans called her). As befitted the goddess of love, there were 1000 prostitutes in the temple to celebrate the gifts of Venus. So not only was there fornication on an industrial scale in Corinth, but it was actually sanctioned by religion. In fact

Aristophanes the comic playwright coined a word in Greek, *korinthiazesthai*, which means, (you guessed it) to fornicate.

So here you have a city which ran on money. Consumerism was the order of the day. It was a city obsessed, as were all Romans, with status and snobbery. Over half the population were slaves who waited on the rest. It was a superstitious place with shrines and temples everywhere. Not only was Corinth multi-faith, it was also, with its Greek, Roman and Jewish communities, multi-cultural. And, as I said, it was sex-mad.

Now, does consumerist, pluralist, superstitious, immoral Corinth 2000 years ago not sound exactly like Britain today? And in this sea of snobbery, money and vice was a tiny group of Jesus-followers, mostly slaves and lower class, though with high-status people like Sosthenes, a former Jew who used to run the synagogue. This miniscule group of about fifty Christians were completely swamped by the 500,000 pagans in Corinth, and struggling to swim against the powerful tide of sex, money and status. We Christians think we have problems today as the underdogs in our secularist, consumerist society! Just imagine what it was like for that handful of Christians in Corinth.

The reason I want us to look at this letter of Paul's is that, though it is 2000 years old, it speaks exactly to our situation as Christians today. We are no longer the top-dogs in our society. Perhaps that is a good thing. But what that handful of powerless Christians were struggling with in a hostile culture is precisely what we are struggling with today. It comes down to this ancient problem: how can we Christians, being *of* the world. Paul gives us practical answers here.

Can we look at our text on p1144, 1 Cor 1.2...? Notice two words, 'church' and 'holy'. 'Church' sounds very grand. In Gk it is *ekklesia*, *ek* = 'out of', and *klesia* is from *kalein* = 'to call'. The church, then, is something 'called out of'. Called out of *what*? Called out of the world; out of the rotten, selfish, money-loving, sex obsessed world of pagan Corinth.

And what about this other word 'holy'? 'Holy/sacred' does not mean 'good', but 'different'. God is 'holy', because he is *different* from us. When we keep the Sabbath day 'holy', we make it different from the other six working days. When we consecrate this bread and wine, we make it *different* from ordinary use. And when Christ calls us to follow him, he calls us to be *different* from the world around us. When he calls us to be 'holy', he wants us to shake off the priorities of the world which values power, self, money, position. So look again at v2 to see what is packed into those seemingly innocent words.... 'Called to be holy'. The KJV which is 400 years old this year misleadingly has 'called to be *saints*'. For us today, this has the idea of being super-good people. 'Saint' is just the Latin word for 'holy', *sanctus*. So the word 'saint' in the sense of 'a *holy* person, ie a person *different* from the surrounding pagan culture' is the regular NT word for a Christian. How do we Christians, 'saints' live in the world without taking on the values and priorities of the world?

That was the challenge facing those few 'saints' in Corinth 2000 years ago swamped by a sea of paganism, and it is our challenge today. How can I be true to Christ in a majority godless culture? How can we follow the Word not the world?