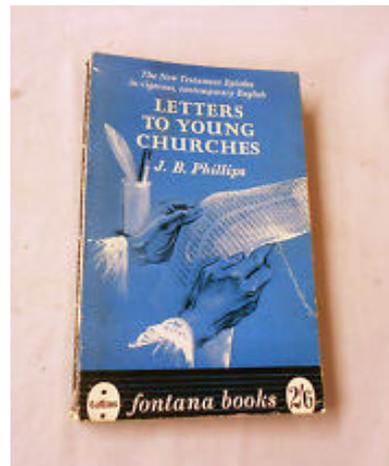


Some years ago I had an interview to see if I was a suitable candidate to become a Reader, and one of the questions put to me was: “How well do you know the Bible?” I said that I knew it reasonably well, but I would not choose the New Testament epistles (or the Old Testament Minor Prophets) as my specialist “Mastermind” topic.

This was the correct answer! “We could *all* do with knowing more about the epistles” said my sympathetic questioner.



I hope I know a little bit more nowadays – enough at least to speak to you about today’s topic, entitled “Letters to Young Churches”, which is the title of a famous book by J B Phillips in which he translated all those NT epistles into “vigorous contemporary English”.

We have four short readings, in two chunks, and what I aim to do is to give examples of how the very early Church – that is, Christian communities set up only 10-15 years after Jesus’ ministry – were supported and sometimes challenged by letters from the Apostles – not just Paul, even though he was the most prominent of the letter writers.

Our understanding of these letters can be helped by knowing what happened when that new Church was first set up. It is especially useful if we link the letter to the narrative given in the Acts of the Apostles of how the Christian message was originally brought to the Church.

And the other thing I want to try and do is to suggest that this is not simply a history lesson from 2000 years ago – some of the ideas and issues that faced the early Church are still common today. Our first two readings describe how the Christian message first came to Europe.

#### Acts 16.9-15

**One night in Troas, Paul had a vision in which he saw a Macedonian standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” As soon as Paul had this vision, we got ready to leave for Macedonia, because we decided that God had called us to preach the Good News to the people there. We left by ship from Troas and sailed straight across to Samothrace, and the next day to Neapolis. From there we went inland to Philippi, a city of the first district of Macedonia; it is also a Roman colony. We spent several days there. On the Sabbath we went out of the city to the riverside where we thought there would be a place where Jews gathered for prayer. We sat down and talked to the women who gathered there. One of those who heard us was Lydia from Thyatira, who was a dealer in purple cloth. She was a woman who worshipped God, and the Lord opened her mind to pay attention to what Paul was saying. After she and the people of her house had been baptised, she invited us, “Come and stay in my house if you have decided that I am a true believer in the Lord.” And she persuaded us to go.**

**Phil. 1.3-7; 2.12-16**

**I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy because of the way in which you have helped me in the work of the gospel from the very first day until now. And so I am sure that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished in the Day of Christ Jesus. You are always in my heart! And so it is only right for me to feel as I do about you For you have all shared with me in this privilege that God has given me, both now that I am in prison and also while I was free to defend the gospel and establish it firmly. So then, dear friends, as you always obeyed me when I was with you, it is even more important that you obey me now while I am away from you. Keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may be innocent and pure as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people. You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, as you offer them the message of life. If you do so, I shall have reason to be proud of you on the Day of Christ, because it will show that all my effort and work have not been wasted...**



The first passage is one of the most vivid in the book of Acts; Luke is the author, and this is one of the sections where he uses the word “we”; and traditionally that is taken as meaning that Luke was with Paul as an eyewitness.

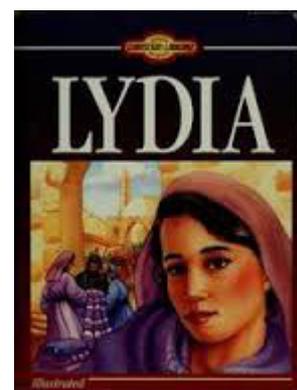
Paul had a vision of a Macedonian asking for help, so a big step was taken: he and his followers crossed the Aegean Sea and into N Greece/Macedonia – to Philippi. There was no synagogue, apparently, but a place near the river where devout people gathered.



And we have a lovely description of Lydia – clearly an influential lady and householder who must have become a pillar of the Church. She is now marked as a local saint. The baptism of Lydia’s household was the tiny embryonic beginning of the Church in Philippi.

It was quite a few years later (ca. 57 AD) that Paul wrote to the Church in Philippi, probably from prison in Rome.

We sometimes think of Paul as pretty uncompromising; perhaps even harsh, and not always easy to follow, using words like justification, judgement and righteousness and so on. One reason he is sometimes complex is that there were no written gospels at this time. The letters were written around 15 years before Mark and up to 45 years before John; therefore Paul needs to explain fundamentals of Christianity.



The letters were written against a pagan background; no church buildings, no Sunday worship, no books; but there was slavery and illiteracy, violence and cynicism while communications were hazardous and unreliable. Therefore, even if Paul does become complicated, there is always a tone of encouragement, and this is certainly the case in our second reading. Note especially Paul's phrase – "...you live in a world of corrupt and sinful people; you must shine like stars lighting up the sky!" This must be one of his best and most poetic lines.

So we can summarise some major themes in the letter to the Philippians: live a life worthy of the gospel; live in unity and humility – and let there be no quarrelling. But be prepared for suffering as you witness to the evil and hostile world. There are some lessons for modern church here – unity and humility and no quarrelling!

### **Cor. 1.2, 10-13**

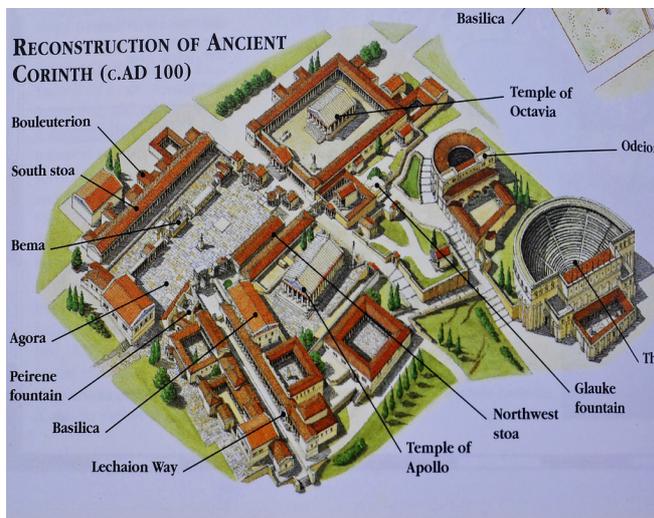
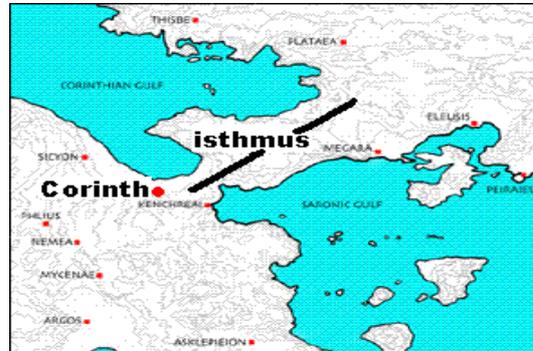
**To the Church of God which is in Corinth, to all who are called to be God's holy people, who belong to him in union with Christ Jesus, together with all people everywhere who worship our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I appeal to all of you my brothers, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you. Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose. For some people from Chloe's family have told me quite plainly, my brothers, that there are quarrels among you. Let me put it this way: each one of you says something different. One says "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Peter"; and another "I follow Christ." Christ has been divided into groups! Was it Paul who died on the cross for you? Were you baptised as Paul's disciples?**

### **Rev. 3.14-19**

**To the angel of the Church in Laodicea:**

**I know what you have done; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish that you were either one or the other! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit you out of my mouth! You say, "I am rich and well off; I have all I need." But you do not know how miserable and pitiful you are! You are poor, naked and blind. I advise you, then, to buy gold from me, pure gold, in order to be rich. Buy also white clothing to dress yourself and cover up your shameful nakedness. Buy also some ointment to put on your eyes, so that you may see. I rebuke and punish all whom I love. Be in earnest then, and turn from your sins.**

Let's talk about Corinth. It was, by the standards of the ancient world, a huge city – with possibly 500 000 people. Situated on this narrow corridor of land, it was cosmopolitan – full of Romans, Greeks, Jews and people of very diverse backgrounds: a great, heaving, immoral city, full of pagan practices. Paul's first visit, which lasted 18 months, is found in Acts 18.



At the time of his first letter [dated ca. 50 AD], things were a bit fragile. There was a lot of opposition especially from those of a Jewish background.

Unity in the Church was a big issue, apparently more so than at Philippi. The extract from the letter is very characteristic of Paul – he is excited and possibly exasperated, and the words flow out! And he is not tactful. He tells the congregation that “Chloe’s people”

have given him a dodgy account. We might wonder how popular that made Chloe among the congregation! “What have you been telling him?”

There is no time to go into much detail, but Paul did not only have to deal with the issue of unity, or party-strife; he had to address issues of immorality in the congregation, and legal issues (members of the congregation going to law with each other); marriage problems, questions of sacred food and scandals at the Lord's supper, to name but a few!

Remember that the Corinthian Church, indeed none of the churches, had a NT manual. The four gospels had not been written, so Paul had to set out sound “Christian instruction” for the first time.

\*

Although we have concentrated on Paul, we need to remember that there are other important letter writers, whose messages are now part of the NT.

There are letters attributed to Peter, John, James and Jude (all original disciples); a letter to the Hebrews (author unknown); and the author of Revelation (another John, John of Patmos)

The Book of Revelation is not thought of as a letter – but it is in fact seven letters – it was a document that did a circular tour of seven Turkish Christian communities, each with an individual message. And the example I've given is the famous letter to Laodicea [– a spa town with lukewarm springs, very salty and not nice to taste; so a symbolic letter about spitting horrible water out would be painfully obvious to the Church there]. The main point, however, is that that Church was terribly complacent. It was wealthy enough, but there was no urgency, no Christian imperative. It got severely censured.



Finally, we should remember there are “young” Churches today, where the Christian message is spreading for the first time. They are mostly in Africa or the Third World, and the Church in Madagascar is an excellent example. We know from Rev Olivier’s letters that Christianity is spreading into remote village communities. Therefore new buildings are needed, and no doubt books and Bible and resources for evangelism. We need to be proud



of the work of Olivier and his evangelists, and privileged to support this work.

For us here in England, the messages for the early Church are still relevant. Like the Philippians we need to witness to Christ in a generally “hostile” world – or at least a world that rejects or ignores the central Christian message; “pagan and cynical” are not necessarily unfair descriptions for our current society.

Remember, too, the need for unity between denominations; but also within Anglican Communion. This is something we should pray about ceaselessly.

To conclude – remember Paul’s great message – to all Christians. Shine like stars!

Amen.



**“You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, as you offer them the message of life.”**