

A couple of weeks ago I was preaching on Romans chapter one, and I said that I found it a difficult passage of scripture because it forced me consider sin, and the fact that I am a sinner, and that the lifestyle or life-choices of many people are sinful. While I don't have too much of a problem accepting that I am a sinner, I find it uncomfortable to declare that certain sections of our society are sinners. I've found the churches debate about same sex clergy to be difficult because there is a part of me that would like not to condemn the lifestyle of others, but scriptures such as Romans chapter one gives me no choice.

I find it interesting how Christians grasp onto certain scriptures and use them as justification for them holding to certain beliefs. Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2 is used to support the belief that women should be silent in church, and to dress modestly. And today there are churches where women are expected to be silent and have their heads covered. And yet, in our passage for today we have Paul writing the leaders of the church in Corinth, and one of these leaders is a woman called Priscilla! Paul also wrote to Lydia, and he commends Lois and Eunice. So what are we to make of what seems to be a contradiction by Paul? I think when he was teaching that women should be silent in church he was referring to temple worship, for how else can we explain Priscilla being in leadership in Corinth? And what do we mean when we talk of church?

So let's look at the church in Corinth and the role that Priscilla and Aquila had in the church. We learn that Priscilla and Aquila helped Paul by reading Acts 18 and Romans 16. Paul's writing to the church in Rome and he ends his letter with: ***I send greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in the service of Jesus Christ; they risked their lives for me.***

I am grateful to them; not only I but all the Gentile churches as well. Greetings also to the church that meets in their house. By Gentile churches Paul's referring to churches that formed by non-Jewish converts. So who were Priscilla and Aquila? They were Jewish converts who endured persecution, and they risked their lives for Paul, although how we aren't told. They lead a church that meets in their house in Corinth, the early Christian faith was built upon house churches. The first time we hear of Priscilla and Aquila is in Acts 18, where we learn that they were Roman citizens who had to flee from Rome because of persecution of the Jews by Emperor Claudius. When they escaped from Rome they travelled to Corinth and the book of Acts records Paul meeting with them in Corinth and Ephesus; Paul refers to them in his letters to these churches.

There were two reasons for Priscilla and Aquila travelling around. The first was because Aquila was practicing his trade as tentmaker and he and Priscilla were also escaping persecution from Rome. Paul worked with Priscilla & Aquila as a tentmaker in order to support the mission.

Acts 18 tells us; *After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, and he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.* Although Priscilla and Aquila were Jews and had to escape from Rome, their situation was especially precarious because they were Christians. The Christians were growing in number in Rome and this was making the authorities nervous. So they had to flee from Rome and this was why they arrived in Corinth.

Paul seeks refuge with them in Corinth because of their faith and out of Priscilla and Aquila's trouble came blessings. They'd lost their home, their business and friends in Rome. *Yet despite their hardship they were used by God to be a blessing for the people of Corinth.* They brought the Good News of Christ to Corinth. They opened their house to meet and worship with other lonely, frightened and discouraged Christians who had been banished from Rome and other places: Christians would have been banished from most parts of the Roman empire. We can see similarities between them, and the contemporary asylum seeker who tries to settle in a foreign land where they are vilified by many. The next time we hear someone criticising asylum seekers or other minority groups; we should remember that our church was grown out of such as those!

Despite these hardships Aquila and Priscilla shared their house, their food and hospitality with Christians and with Paul when he arrived in Corinth and this led to them forming a meaningful friendship. Their support contributed to the success of Paul's mission. So *Aquila and Priscilla's story is one of tragedy to triumph. It's witness to the fact that God can turn personal tragedy into triumph.*

So what can we learn from Priscilla and Aquila for today's Church? At the beginning of the 21st century the Church of Scotland is facing changes: Numbers are falling and for many; the church has lost its relevance and has little for them. Some people don't feel comfortable coming to church because of what they perceive it to be. They may fear that the people within the church will look down on them or reject them. Some believe the church has lost its Biblical distinctiveness, and I can understand why. Some come to worship their church building and the traditions of the church, people can get caught up in placing so much pride in their building, that they begin to worship the church rather than Christ. Priscilla and Aquila were hampered by many problems, but caring for buildings wasn't one of them.

The church buildings mentioned in the Bible are the temples of the Jewish faith which were inhabited by Pharisees and the High Priests, who opposed Christ and the early Christian church. Which is why Priscilla and Aquila opened their home to those early Christians and ran a house church.

If we read Romans 16 and Acts 18 which record the mission of the early church we can see several things of note: The early Christians were non-professionally mission minded and they didn't need professional ministers. They had confidence in their faith and God's guidance and they didn't need clergy. They carried out mission themselves and there was a system of mutual support where Paul supported those early churches in their mission, and they in turn supported his mission. The early Christians sent out missionaries and the Christian faith took root among ordinary people. ***This mission didn't start with a fully trained professional minister and trickle down. It started with those who were the least, the refugee and the persecuted, the ordinary folk.*** And it worked its way up into the very highest parts of the Roman empire. Their mission was successful we learn this from the greetings contained in Paul's letters. Paul, Priscilla and Aquila all understood that it was vital to share the news of Christ with others, and they knew that the most effective way of introducing someone to Christ was through relationships.

When I was trained as a minister I learned how to interpret scripture. I was taught systematic theology and ethics. I loved learning about ecclesiastical history and the psychology of pastoral care. I've had a good education but I was never taught how to build relationships that would lead others to Christ which is so important. When demonstrating Christ's love which is at the heart of the Gospel meaningful relationships are vital and Priscilla and Aquila understood this. When someone is troubled or facing illness or struggling with bereavement what counts?

A minister telling them that Jesus loves them and everything will work out fine, or someone getting alongside them in the quiet and supportive way? I know what I would prefer! This is what Paul, Priscilla and Aquila understood. They were persecuted people living in difficult times and yet they engaged in mission to build the church. And this church they built was not a grand building, it was a people. Just ordinary folk with troubles and worries just like us. *Being a member of a church means being part of the fellowship; having real friendships and living in harmony and peace with others.* That's what Priscilla and Aquila counted as important and their churches grew.

But one important point about relationships; they have to imitate Christ to be effective for mission. I must confess that sometimes my attitude towards others is not very Christ-like. There is some folk I find difficult and they are not in Thornliebank in case you're wondering. There are some folk that I find irritating and I am less than patient with them, and my attitude is so wrong and it must grieve God. I suspect some of us can relate to what I'm saying.

Is the attitude Christ calls us to? Will my lack of patience or my intolerance build the church? In *Matthew 25: 40* Jesus says: *I tell you the truth, whatever you do did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.* That verse pulls me up short when I consider my attitude at times. If the church is a people then surely it must be an inclusive people, where outsiders are welcomed and are nurtured into a relationship that has Christ at its centre. For Christ's sake and not ours. Priscilla and Aquila were refugees and they understood what it meant to be outcast and socially unacceptable. Yet they opened their house to others in the same position, regardless of the risks to themselves. They took the question of *What would Jesus do* seriously and built churches, bringing many to faith in Christ.

At the beginning of this sermon I raised the question ‘What do we mean by church.’ I think the answer is found in example of the Apostle Paul, and Priscilla and Aquila. They didn’t think about what church was, *they did church*. Church was their way of life not just somewhere to go on a Sunday.

If we do church then we open our lives to God’s Word, and not just the passages that fit our personal circumstances, but the passages that challenges us to make changes. If we do church then we ask God to help us live in harmony with each other, treating each other with respect and the qualities displayed by His Son, both inside our buildings and more importantly, outside in our world! If we do church then we take the responsibility to ensure that the Gospel is carried onto those who are lost, for if we don’t do it then who will? And may God go with us as we carry out His mission. ***Amen***

Let’s pray.

(1885 words)