



Rachel Nicholls introduces life in CORINTH



A CITY REBORN

Corinth was a new Roman city with an ancient Greek past. It was sacked by the Romans in 146 BC and restored in AD 44. Major building work was needed to recreate the city. While some features, such as the temples, were restored on their previous sites, the forum and many parts of the centre of the city were remodelled according to plans drawn up in Rome, and modified slightly to allow for the physical limitations of the site. At one time, scholars believed that a good proportion of the population would have been expat Roman veterans settled in the city en masse, but it is now thought that these numbers were not so high. There certainly would have been a Roman population alongside the Greek one, but there were also immigrants and migrant workers from all around the Mediterranean, including people from Crete, Syria and Macedonia, and also Egypt and Judea. For many of these people, this was a go-ahead place, looking forward, not backwards.

LAYERS OF SOCIETY

While it was a new and prosperous place, we should not run away with the idea that it was a place where anyone could prosper by hard work and that social opportunities were equal. There were still significant social divisions, not only between the very rich and the very poor, but also between those who were born free and those who were born slaves. Although it was possible for a prosperous and able slave to buy their freedom and become a 'freedman', there is evidence that a freedman would still be barred from some civic positions.

Social position was also closely associated with a sense of 'honour'. This could be acquired by being part of a faction that gained an advantage over others. The idea of living at peace with others was not the norm; disharmony was seen to increase honour, and disunity was encouraged. In his letters, Paul directly challenges the disunity of how Corinth functioned.

STRATEGIC LOCATION

Corinth was a significant port, with access to both the Ionian and Aegean Seas. In the first century, it was comparable to London or Paris in importance, within the province of Achaia. There were many small family shipping businesses, and an established banking business because of the extent of trade.

While the ancient city of Athens required subsidies from Rome for new building projects, Corinth was able to finance its own development and growth.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Religious life in Corinth would have been mostly pagan, including worship of a range of traditional gods, such as Aphrodite and Apollo, whose temples had surrounded the original city. Religious practice would also have included devotions that immigrants brought with them on an individual basis. In among this mix there was the cult around the Emperor Augustus (63 BC to AD 14), which validated and reinforced Roman political power through divine endorsement. People often made a very personal selection from the many gods available, worshipping a number of them in a variety of ways.

We know from Acts 18.4 that there was a Jewish community in Corinth, because there was a synagogue. Jews were tolerated within the Roman political economy as a clearly defined group with, to Roman thinking, eccentric and atheistic beliefs (how could anyone who only believed in one god be described as anything but atheistic?). They were, perhaps, seen as fairly harmless, provided their views did not result in rebellion and sedition. To excuse them from the cult of the Emperor on the grounds of their religious scruples was probably the best way of ensuring that they did not become radicalised in this way. (Thus the chilling responses of the Jewish leaders to Pilate: 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the Emperor', Luke 23.2, and 'We have no King but the Emperor', John 19.15.)

Acts 18.7 highlights how the different religious communities lived side by side and interacted: Paul leaves the synagogue and goes as far as – the house next door! And this house belongs to Titius Justus, 'a worshipper of God', in other words, a Gentile interested in the Jewish faith, perhaps attracted by the principled consistency of it, the much stronger link between ethics and worship, even the notion of the one unseen Creator. It was difficult to convert fully to be a Jew, because for a man it would involve circumcision, and also the breaking of ties with family and perhaps with trade guilds. It would mean the beginning of a new life within a different sub-community. But it was possible to be a 'God-fearer' or 'worshipper of God' and be on the edge of the synagogue.