

Devotion – Twentieth Week after Pentecost

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

Jim and I returned from the Mediterranean on October 6, and we are just about back to “Atlanta” time. We spent 11 days touring ancient Neolithic, Roman, and Christian sites in Cyprus, Greece, Croatia, and Slovenia.

What struck me throughout this trip was the early Christian symbology in numerous buildings – especially early Roman houses with mosaics of the ikhthus – the fish. Literally, the word “Ichthus” is an acronym where the letters stand for words. It means Jesus (I) Christ (CH), God’s (TH) son (U), Savior (S). More informally, it is known as the “sign of the fish.” Jesus Christ and His apostles were known as “fishers of men.” Early Christians used this symbol of the fish to show others they were believers in a time when they could be imprisoned or killed for those beliefs. It was like a secret “handshake.” We also saw crosses imbedded in walls and on the floors, and Roman pagan temples turned into early Christian churches.

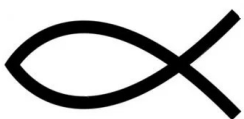
I think the most meaningful ruin we visited was Corinth, which dates from the 8th century B.C. As we walked through the agora, the marketplace, the guide casually said – “now over here is the judgment seat platform where Paul was brought before Gallio.” I was blown away. This episode occurred in Acts 18. Gallio was the older brother of Seneca, the Roman stoic philosopher who first tutored and later counseled Nero, the future Roman Emperor. In 52 AD, the Roman Senate appointed Gallio the governor or “proconsul” of the Roman Senatorial province of “Achaia,” whose capital was Corinth. Acts 18:12-13 states this: “When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, saying, ‘This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.’”

Now Gallio somehow figured out that the Jewish leaders didn’t have a case against Paul, because in verses 14-17, we read this: “And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters.’ And he drove them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things.” Paul didn’t even have to speak, but I can imagine him standing there, prepared to protest as a Roman citizen against these Jewish synagogue leaders who didn’t want him evangelizing about Jesus.

Throughout these countries, Paul is revered. He and Barnabus went throughout Cyprus establishing small household churches, and then we know that he had a long involvement with Corinth, at times contentious based on how they were worshipping. There are also many icons and paintings in both Catholic and Orthodox churches to Mary and the apostles – even the ceilings and walls are covered in paintings. We visited one Catholic church built on top of an ancient Roman ruin, where the priest was baptizing several babies. Families were all dressed up, flowers were given to the couple, and babies were mostly behaving. It was such a wonderful sight to see. And beside the altar there was an opening showing ancient Roman mosaics many feet below the present floor.

This connection from Neolithic pit tombs from 7000 BCE to modern day worship in churches built during the Norman and Gothic periods gave me a true sense of the history and importance of the spread of the Christian faith throughout this part of the world. As an American, I was stunned by the actual physical presence of these wonderful ruins and religious places. It was also reassuring to see how seriously the people there still take their Christianity – they talked proudly of their history and decorated churches, as well as their parades during festival days.

We are “satellite” communities from these early Christian evangelizing efforts, and I found being able to visit “mother churches” a highly meaningful experience. I hope you can visit this part of the world sometime and become acquainted with your Christian roots.



Jeanne