

The Golden Thread of Faith & Restoration

This year, we went to Cyprus for our Easter holidays and stayed at the Coral Bay Resort near Paphos. Cyprus was beautifully green, the temperature a balmy 18-20C, and there were just enough tourists dotted around the historical sites to give the place a real sense of mystery. Locals told us that if we had arrived later into the summer, the fields would have turned brown and the heat intense!

We visited the Paphos waterfront, walked along the harbour promenade, visited the Roman fort and saw many ships docked on the quayside: vessels from all around the world bringing tourists eager to visit a place steeped in history.

Whilst in Paphos, we visited St Paul's Pillar. In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit sent Paul to visit Cyprus in 45AD, along with Barnabas, who had been born there, and John Mark. In chapter 13, we read that they preached across the whole island before arriving in Paphos.

Whilst there, they were summoned by the Proconsul Sergius Paulus, a prominent Roman leader, who wanted to hear about "The Way" – what the Christian faith was originally called - for himself. Paul was able to demonstrate God's power and the truth about the resurrection of Jesus and Sergius Paulus became the first prominent Roman leader to convert to Christianity in Cyprus.

The Christian Basilica, Chrysopolitissa, is where St Paul's Pillar still stands. Legend has it that Paul was tied to this pillar and whipped by the Jewish believers because of his preaching. It is now a stump of marble, surrounded by a vast footprint of ancient buildings. You can see the archaeological remains of several places of worship: huge stones set deep in the ground, marking out past worship and meeting rooms, where Christians had shared their daily lives of faith and witness.

It is clear that after the conversion of Sergius Paulus, Christian worship thrived in Cyprus, but the archaeological findings at the location also tell us it was not all plain sailing.

The earliest Byzantine structure was the largest on the island, its floors decorated throughout with beautiful geometric mosaics. Originally, the structure had had seven aisles and six columns, an apse and a nave. The walls were covered in marble up to a certain height, then decorated above with frescoes. There was an atrium, a fountain and an episcopal palace. Later modifications to the building saw the aisles reduced to five. The reason is still unclear – fear of attack, extreme weather events or reduced finances could have been to blame.

During the early 7th century, during the Arab uprisings, the buildings were damaged and the columns in the nave were etched with the names of fallen Muslim warriors. The Basilica was finally abandoned by the Christians after the great earthquakes of 685AD.

The collapse of these magnificent buildings led to the site being used as a quarry. The devotional area was, however, preserved as was the episcopal palace. A much smaller church was built within the ruins, which was repaired and rebuilt and remained in use until the early 1500s when the existing church, Ayia Kyriaki, was constructed on the east side of the archaeological site. This beautiful church was open for worship when we visited; a sense of deep calm, history and longevity filling the worship space with wonder and mystery.

We, too, are experiencing some significant changes. The Christians worshipping at Didsbury URC made the decision to move their place of worship and have chosen us at Christ Church

to join with. We have all agreed to form a new church called Cornerstone United Reformed Church. Our opening service will be on Sunday, June 4th at 2.30pm.

Change often brings both challenge and hope in equal measure - hopefully not as much as for our Christian friends from antiquity, who had to reduce the Basilica's aisles from seven to five, but things will be different for us all from now on. The way we do things will change, some elements and rituals will be kept because they are essential to our shared worship, others will be gently set aside as a new way of working together emerges.

This is also a time when we will all be asked to express our thoughts, opinions and wishes as we learn together. It can be difficult to share our own private thoughts, or to speak out in meetings, but unless we are all able to contribute to the discussions, we may find that things we hold sacred as an individual may be overlooked by our silence.

A new church is a time for great joy and reflection. As we look ahead in hope, we offer our prayers and warmest wishes to each other. Let us step out bravely, claiming the stone the builders rejected as our new Cornerstone.

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