

An illustration of St. Paul preaching to a crowd in a classical building. St. Paul, a man with a beard wearing a blue tunic and a dark blue cloak, stands on a raised platform with his arms outstretched towards a group of people. The crowd, consisting of men and women in various colored robes (green, orange, blue, red, white), is gathered around him. Some are standing, while others are kneeling or sitting. The setting is a grand building with large columns and arches. In the background, there are hills under a blue sky with some clouds. The overall style is that of a religious book cover illustration.

# St Paul's Travelogue

THE MAN & THE MISSION

WRITTEN BY FR JOHN DEEHAN

EDITED BY PROFESSOR SUSAN DOCHERTY

THE  
GOD  
WHO  
SPEAKS

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.  
Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.  
The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything,  
but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving  
let your requests be made known to God.  
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."  
(Philippians 4:4-7)*



# St Paul's Travelogue

## THE MAN & THE MISSION

In the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul on the 29th June, Peter is described as being 'foremost in confessing the faith', and the one 'who established the early Church from the remnant of Israel'.

Paul is described as 'the outstanding preacher (of the faith), master and teacher of the Gentiles'. 'Each in a different way gathered together the one family of Christ, and revered together throughout the world, they share one Martyr's crown'.

We may not remember many of the stories associated with Peter in the New Testament, but we will know even fewer about Paul apart from the account of his conversion. We may never have heard a Sunday homily dedicated exclusively to any of the readings from the Letters of Paul. Like the author of 2 Peter, there are always those who will agree that 'there are some things in the letters of Paul that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction' (2 Peter 3:16). Despite the dominance of his writings in the New Testament and the emphasis on his mission in the Acts of the Apostles, less than fifty percent of Paul's writings were read annually in the pre-Vatican II lectionary. That Paul was the first great preacher, pastor and theologian of the Church, and one of the most controversial figures in the early Jesus movement, seems to have passed many by.

Despite most Catholics today being spiritual descendants of the Gentiles converted by Paul, it is Peter who has proved the more influential figure in Catholic communities, viewed through the prism of the Papacy, whereas Paul has tended to attract greater interest within the reformed Protestant tradition. From the beginning, both within and outside the Christian community, Paul was no stranger to controversy, notably in his willingness to stand up to Peter in public (Galatians 2:11-14). The early Church gradually saw itself as founded on the ministry, witness and martyrdom of both Apostles.





# Who Was Paul?

Acts 22:3 records Paul's claim that he was born in Tarsus, the Roman capital of Cilicia. There his family had gained the privilege of Roman citizenship which Paul would invoke later in his ministry to receive a fair trial before a Roman court. Tarsus boasted an important Stoic Philosophical School.

By associating himself with Tarsus, Paul would have been hinting that in terms of his education he was on a par with any intellectual of the time.

St Jerome, the 4th Century translator of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, records a tradition that Paul was born into a Jewish family in Giscala in the north of Galilee (Commentary on the Epistle to Philemon vv. 23-4). He records that after Giscala fell to the Roman General Varus the family fled to Tarsus in Cilicia, in modern day Turkey, where they later acquired Roman citizenship.



St Jerome



Saul of Tarsus





MODERN DAY TARSUS

## Paul the Pharisee



*"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia,  
but brought up in this city, educated at  
the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict  
manner of the law of our fathers,  
being zealous for God as all of you are this day."  
(Acts 22:3)*

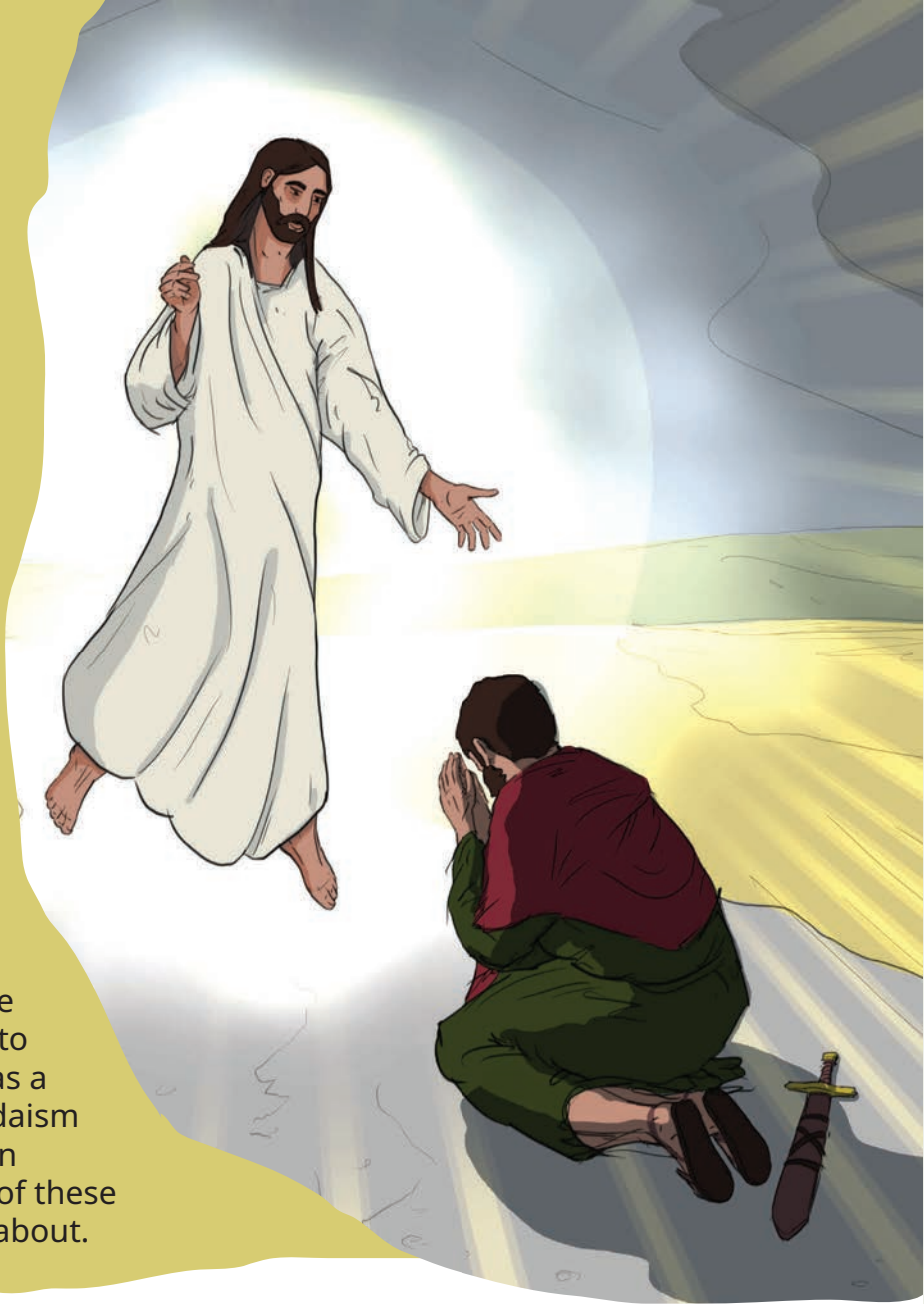
But for all his classical education it is clear that Paul was passionately committed to his ancestral faith. As a young man he made his way to Jerusalem where he studied under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). In Jerusalem he associated himself with the Pharisees who were outstanding champions of the interpretation of the Torah, the Law of Moses. For the young Pharisee, Paul, Torah was more than just a set of laws. Central to his religious life it revealed God's will, and how to live.



# Paul's Conversion

Paul, who at this stage in his life went by his Jewish name Saul, never encountered Jesus during his ministry. He first appears at the stoning of St Stephen (Acts 7:58). By then he would have formed an impression of Jesus and his followers, from hearsay within the Pharisaic community, as completely wrong and blasphemous in their claims.

He was sufficiently alarmed by the early Christian preaching that he accompanied the lynch mob that stoned Stephen to death. Paul saw the early Christian groups not as an exotic religion from abroad, like the many cults that had infiltrated into the cities of the Roman empire, but as a dangerous heretical group within Judaism who needed to be confronted or even neutralised. It was in the pursuance of these objectives that his conversion came about.



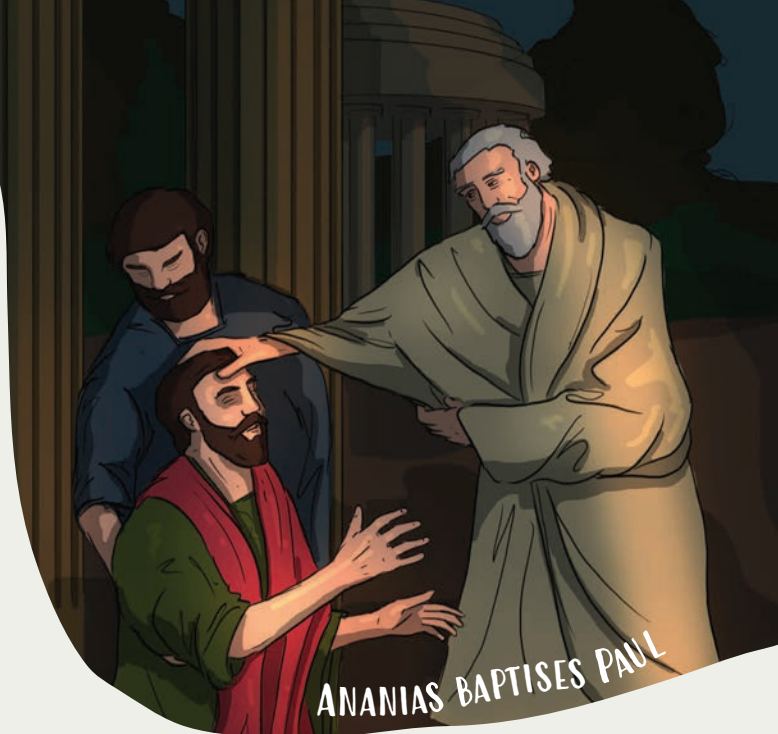
## Paul's Conversion & Vocation speeches in the Acts of the Apostles

Paul himself in his letters is very discreet about his conversion, describing it in the Letter to the Galatians simply as a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:12). The early Christian community however was so intrigued by how Paul, the zealous Pharisee, could have become the champion preacher of the gospel that the story is put into the mouth of Paul three times in Acts, (Acts 9:1-19, 22:1-21, 26:1-23).

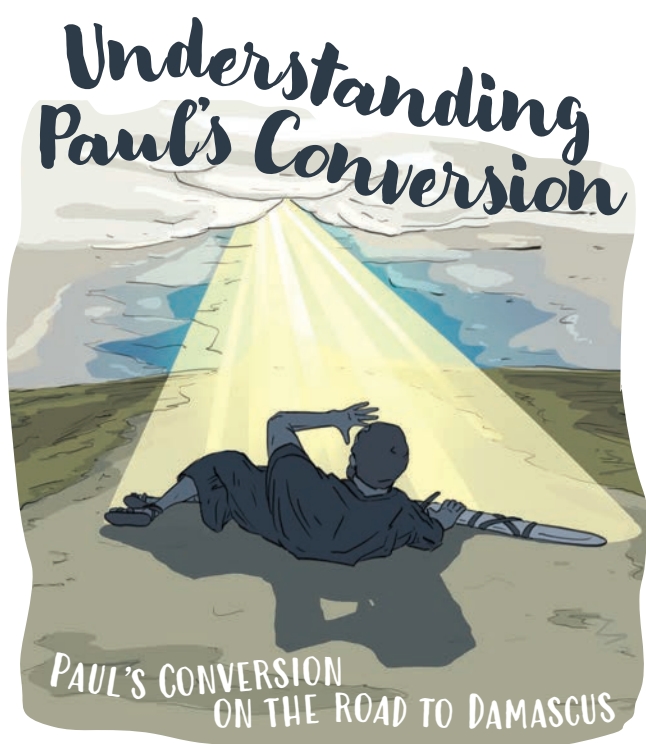
As is often the case with stories of conversion, Paul's 'conversion' is reduced to one great moment followed by other stages. Paul was on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus when he heard the risen Jesus identify himself with his followers, saying to him, 'Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (Acts 9:4) That moment when Paul discovered that this Jesus whom he had heard about was alive and present in these Christian communities was not the end but the first stage of Paul's new calling. But first, he had to obey the Lord's command to make himself known to the communities whom up to this point he intended to destroy.

The three Pauline speeches in Acts, each in their own way, throw light on the nature of his conversion. An important element in each is the theme of light and darkness. In all three the voice of Jesus is preceded by a bright light, a theophany, whose power throws Paul and his companions to the ground. In the first two speeches the light makes Paul blind, until he confronts the Christian community in the person of Ananias, is baptised and regains his sight. The emphasis here is on Paul's personal conversion to Jesus and his community, to which we will return later.

The third speech of Paul before King Agrippa develops the nature of Paul's conversion. The risen Jesus asks Paul, 'Why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads' (Acts 26:14). The image is one of useless resistance on the part of Paul to the prodding of God's grace. This implies that the divine call did not begin on the road to Damascus but had been at work in Paul's heart from his first encounter with the Christian communities, though he had been blind to it, and only then did he recognise that everything that happened up to this point had been the work of God.



Furthermore, Paul's 'conversion' takes on a new dimension. Jesus tells him that his illumination is given to him so that he in turn may illuminate the Gentiles and rescue them from the darkness of Satan into light of God. Paul goes on to tell King Agrippa that he could not resist the vision but responded by beginning his preaching ministry. This would arouse the same opposition of his fellow Jews against him that he had showed to the first Christian communities, and led to his appearance before King Agrippa.



The story of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is traditionally described as Paul's conversion. This is no simple change of religion. It would be some two centuries later before Christianity and Judaism parted the ways and came to be seen as two different religions. The groups that Paul persecuted were movements within Judaism, and the Roman historian Tacitus described 'Christians' as 'a class of people, hated by the populace, who were blamed for an abominable superstition that first broke out in Judaea' (Tacitus Annals 15:44). In the New Testament there are only three references to 'Christians', as a name given to the movement by others (Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; and 1 Peter 4:16). Paul, in Romans 11:1, identifies himself strongly with the Jewish People. In Paul's world view, one was either a Jew or a Greek, meaning a pagan.

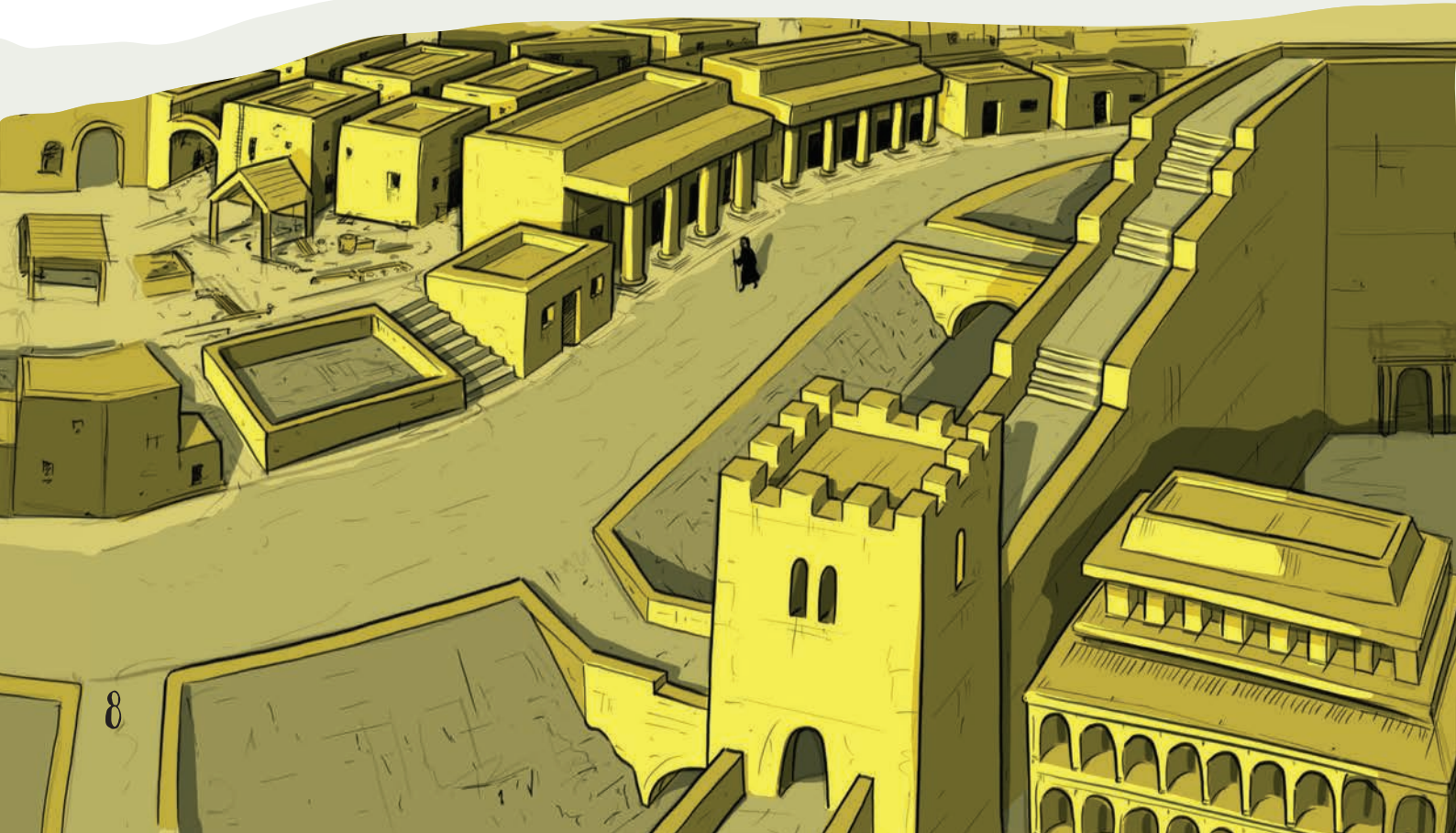


# Paul & the Law

If Paul had known nothing else about Jesus before his Damascus experience, he would have known that Jesus and his companions were accused of not adhering to the demands of the Law. Some Scripture passages (e.g. Deuteronomy 21:23) could be read as implying that Jesus even died under a divine curse by being crucified (Galatians 3:13). As a Pharisaic Jew, Paul would have seen obedience to the commands of Torah, including what was called the oral law, a legal commentary on the Scriptures (not totally divorced from Scripture), as essential to being judged by God as good, or just. So important was the Law as the revelation of God's will that there is a tradition in Judaism that God studied the Torah every day, and this was how God continued to create the world according to the divine plan (cf. Rabbi Yehudah, Avodah Zarah, 3b in the Babylonian Talmud). Therefore, in the eyes of strict Jews such as the Pharisees, anyone who disobeyed Torah could not be just before God. This even applied to people like labourers (the people of the land) who by sheer force of circumstances were unable to obey the Law in its entirety.



Paul's conversion then was not a turning away from Judaism as such, or even a turning away from the Law in every detail, but a radical turning towards Christ. Where previously Torah had been at the heart of Paul's understanding of God and the way he was called to live his life, now Torah had been replaced by Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. To be just, or righteous, was to share in the very life of God. The fundamental insight which marked Paul's conversion was that the Law while good in itself could not make a person just, because righteousness was a gift that a person could only receive from God through Christ, not something one could acquire on one's own merits (cf. Roman 3:21-26).





# Paul, Apostle of Christ Jesus & Herald of the Gospel

Paul begins a number of his letters by describing himself as 'appointed by God'. To the modern ear this may sound strange, even arrogant, but his claim is not his alone. In the Acts of the Apostles his claim is ratified by the discernment of the Christian community. By the time Acts was written, somewhere towards the end of the first century CE, Christian communities were present in many of the towns and cities of the Roman empire, and the dominant force in making that happen was Paul.

In 1 Corinthians 1:21 Paul describes the content of his proclamation as kerygma, a Greek word closely associated with the word keryx, meaning a herald. He implicitly compares himself with the messengers who would be sent from Rome throughout the empire to announce, for example, that a new emperor was now in place, or that the emperor or another distinguished person was coming to visit a particular city. The content of his proclamation was 'good news' (euaggelion), not the good news about Jesus Christ (in the sense of information) but the good news that is Jesus himself, alive and present among us. In a world where religion and politics were not separated, and the Roman Emperor declared himself to be Lord and saviour, Paul's preaching would have been politically subversive.

**KERYX** (Herald)  
**EUAGGELION** (Good News)  
**APOSTOLOS** (To send out)



In his letters, Paul frequently refers to himself as an apostle, a title only given to him once in Acts. The basic meaning of the Greek apostolos (the noun rooted in the verb 'to send out') was a messenger, an accredited envoy or even an ambassador. In addition to the group of Twelve apostles to which Paul did not belong, Paul himself refers to 'the apostles of the churches', accredited envoys charged with collecting the funds for the Church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:23). In Paul's case the word 'apostle' encapsulated his missionary work which included his initial contact with those to whom he announced the good news, his gathering them into communities and his pastoral support. There were those in the young churches who regarded apostles as people of dignity and were reluctant to acknowledge Paul's use of the term for himself. For Paul the title 'apostle of Jesus Christ' often appears to be a personal rather than an official one, which he sometimes had to defend in the face of opposition. Integral to the use of this title was his personal identification with the sufferings of Christ in the various trials he went through himself for the sake of his mission to the Gentiles. This became the foundation of his apostolic authority.

# Paul the Prophet

An aspect of Paul's self-identity which sometimes passes unnoticed is his understanding of himself as a prophet. Acts 28:25-28 has him quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 implicitly claiming to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy that the salvation promised in the Hebrew Scriptures has been realised in Jesus and offered first to Israel and now to the Gentiles. His language in Galatians 1:15 also echoes the prophetic call of Jeremiah 1:4-5. This self-understanding further unites him with Christ, who is also presented in the gospels as a prophet like those of Israel's past (e.g. Luke 4:24-27).

## Preacher to Jews & Gentiles

When we speak of Paul as a preacher, it is probably not helpful to compare him with the preachers we experience today. Preaching for us is usually a liturgical activity, an exposition of sacred texts, particularly of the gospels. When Paul was 'preaching' the gospels had not yet been written down. Paul's Scriptures were what modern Christians understand to be the Old Testament. They were written on large scrolls and as sacred writings they would have been kept in safe places, like the synagogues. Books and scrolls were generally the property of communities and only a few very wealthy individuals. As a Pharisee Paul would have studied the Scriptures and carried them in his heart, not as part of his baggage as he travelled.





In Acts we see Paul preaching to Jews and Gentiles. Among the Jews he declared with the help of the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul's early preaching, as recorded in the first half of the Book of Acts, is not unlike Peter's, and so perhaps typical of the earliest Christian evangelisation.

He has still to find his own voice. Paul receives a mixed reception. Some of his hearers become believers, maybe those known as Godfearers, Gentiles who had an admiration for Jews and frequented their synagogues but had not fully adopted Judaism. But on the whole, the reaction to Paul's preaching is negative, as in Acts 13:44-52 where Paul and Barnabas receive such hostility from the Jews that they shake the dust from their feet and go onto the Gentiles.

*"In him we live and move and have our being.."*  
(Acts 17:28)

Acts 17:16-21 also mentions Paul preaching in the marketplace in Athens. Paul supported himself and his travelling companions by making and repairing tents (Acts 18:1-3), a skill that would have been much in demand when people came into the towns and cities during the pagan festivals. If Paul was staying for some time, he would probably have rented one of the tiny workshops along the main streets and engaged his customers in conversation. One can imagine the discussions becoming heated from time to time as Paul brought the debates around to the God he worshipped as compared with the local idols, which he would have regarded as a waste of space, and then told them that God had raised from the dead a crucified man in Palestine called Jesus. It is tempting to romanticise Paul's ministry and the power of his preaching, but there is no evidence to suggest that at this time the world was waiting to be converted. The thought that God would be interested in a crucified man, whom most people would assume was a slave, a robber or a terrorist, would be considered preposterous.

Nevertheless, Paul did have much success, despite proclaiming a message that many dismissed as foolishness, not, ultimately, due to his rhetorical skill but through the grace of God and the power of the spirit, which enabled Paul to be a living commentary on the message he proclaimed.

