

**April 25, 2004**

**Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women**

**Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

From a worldly point of view most Corinthian Christians hardly amounted to much. When St. Paul wrote to the congregation some six or so years after its founding, he mentioned that their number included "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble" (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Indeed, Paul went on to remark, in his own missionary efforts at Corinth he had deliberately refrained from using "persuasive words of human wisdom" (2:4), the sort that might appeal to the powerful and well educated. He had intentionally directed his message, rather, to the city's lower, less seemly classes—drunkards, thieves, and sexual perverts—those social elements that respectable citizens might regard as the very dregs (6:9-11).

That does not mean, however, that the church at Corinth included no one wise, no one mighty, no one noble. In fact, we are sure of one Christian in the place who was arguably all three of these things. His name was Erastus.

From a worldly point of view, Erastus was certainly an important Corinthian. We know that he held significant positions of public trust, one of which was City Treasurer, \*ho oikonomos tes poleos\* (Romans 16:23). In addition he was, according to a Latin inscription on a marble pavement block excavated there, the city's Commissioner of Public Works, who "laid this pavement at his own expense."

In such positions of municipal service, the responsibilities of Erastus were enormous. Corinth, sitting on a narrow isthmus joining the ports of Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf and Lechaion on the Gulf of Corinth, was a bustling and wealthy commercial center. Its strategic position joining the Aegean and Adriatic seas prompted the Romans, who had destroyed the place in 146 B.C., to reestablish it as a Roman colony by a decree of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. It was apparently settled by freedmen from Rome, a circumstance that would account for

the Latin names of some of the Corinthian Christians: Crispus, Gaius, Fortunatus, Tertius, Quartus (Romans 16:22-23; 1 Corinthians 1:14; 16:17).

During the century that followed its refounding, Corinth had become one of the most prosperous cities of the Empire. Various wares from hundreds of ports and islands of the Black Sea and the Aegean arrived at Corinth on hundreds of ships, there to be bartered for the products of Adriatic cities arriving from the other direction.

The smaller of these ships were actually dragged over the Isthmus of Corinth through an artificial shipway that the historian Strabo called a \*diolkos\*, or "haul-across." To and from the larger vessels, meanwhile, there moved the steady traffic of wheeled conveyances bearing assorted products from one port to the other, a process requiring the daily labor of thousands. Corinth was ever abuzz with businessmen, seamen, galley slaves, stevedores, longshoremen, and other dock workers, along with hawkers and vendors of every sort.

And of all of this enormous commerce, needless to say, the city of Corinth exacted its regular tolls and taxes. Finally, the oversight of this vast resulting revenue was the responsibility of the city's treasurer and commissioner of public works, a Christian named Erastus.

Because the Romans had destroyed classical Corinth two hundred years earlier, modern archeology has mainly uncovered remnants from the city's later period, including the time of St. Paul. Since this later city was less than a century old when Paul arrived there in 49/50, it was still very much under construction. Supported by the enormous new wealth of the place, this construction was varied and extensive. It included roads and elaborate public buildings adorned with colonnades. Especially prominent to the modern visitor is the "judgment seat," or \*bema\*, where Sosthenes was beaten in the spring of A.D. 51 (Acts 17:18).

It is instructive to think that less than a decade later a Christian would be in charge of this extensive municipal renovation and have the oversight of its funding. Sosthenes, then, stands at the head of a long tradition of Christians who served their fellow citizens in government and public trust.

It is also instructive to observe that the high political position of Erastus does not seem to have made him a dominant figure in the local church. Even in a congregation that had not many wise, mighty, or noble, Erastus appears to have been just another Christian.

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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