

Sermon: Sunday 10th May, 2020

Ephesus: A City in Crisis - Acts 19

When the year 2020 began we prepared ourselves for a normal year. There were news reports of an illness in a remote part of China, but nothing that would really affect us. But since then, our way of life has been challenged in ways we could never have imagined. Things that we have taken for granted - plentiful food in shops, going to cafes and pubs, meeting up with friends and families, holidays - have all ceased to happen. The way we live has come under dramatic change. Much of how we are used to living has been shaken to the core.

Its helpful to reflect on our experience and emotions as we come to explore Paul's time in Ephesus. For Paul's two years in the city has a profound impact on the cultural, religious, political and financial life of this city, shaking it to its core. How people responded then may help us to think how we respond now.

We start with our reading from this morning, towards the end of Paul's time in the city. Ephesus was one of the great cities of the ancient world, situated in western Turkey and commanding the trade routes between east and west. Not only that, it hosted one of the seven great wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. This was an architectural wonder, to compare with the pyramids of Egypt, the colossus of Rhodes and the hanging gardens of Babylon, and it dominated the skyline for miles around and the cultural and financial life of the city. Religious devotees and tourists flocked from across the mediterranean world to Ephesus to be awestruck by the temple and to offer their worship. And they would buy silver-worked statues of the goddess as an idol and/or as a souvenir.

So when Paul begins preaching a message that proclaims that Jesus Christ is the son of the only God, and that idols and temple worship is pointless, there is a direct attack on the lives of many who make their living from the temple and its associated trades.*

Imagine a partisan football crowd outraged by several decisions that they have seen gone against their team, causing them to lose a crucial match, and we begin to get a taste of the anger. Recall scenes from Iran just a few months ago of crowds of thousands on the streets, all rhythmically chanting against American aggression, and the picture becomes clearer still. This was a crowd full of anger, wanting to blame someone.

I fear a time may come when a tipping point is reached in our country - when people's remarkable compliance, patience and forbearance with the lock-down may turn to something less positive - an anger and bitterness at the financial crisis we may well be heading for, and a desire to find someone to blame. Loss of income, damaged economic interests, are powerful stirrers of anger, whether in Paul's day or our own. A summer, autumn or indeed winter of discontent may not be too far off. How will we respond? Will we choose to join that crowd demanding retribution for our own financial loss or will we choose to stand up and work and pray for the common good, even if that comes at a cost? Learning from our mistakes, holding each other accountable, looking out for the poor and vulnerable will undoubtedly be positive steps moving forward; looking for scapegoats to blame far less so. Will we take a lead? **

Earlier in his time in Ephesus, and just before the reading we heard, Paul had already rocked the boat amongst the magic-workers and exorcists in the city.

Ephesus, as well as being the home to the worship of the greek goddess, Artemis, was also a religious and cultic melting pot, a place that attracted people from every religion and sect. It was a place where the supernatural was normal, where belief in sorcery and magic was commonplace.

So when people begin to discover the impact of the name of Jesus to heal people, they quite readily absorb the name of Jesus into their healing and exorcism rituals - particularly one Jewish-pagan cult called the "sons of Sceva" - who went round trying to heal people in "the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches".

But this presumption quickly backfires on them. Jesus is not a name to be chanted in some quasi-magical incantation; he is a person to be worshipped and to be in relationship with.

This is another huge challenge to the way of life of Ephesus. We've seen how Paul's message had challenged the economic life of the city; here his message challenges all its religious presumptions. Faith is not about tapping into a divine power source to gain mystical or supernatural abilities. It is about relationship, specifically, being in a loving relationship with God through Jesus.

This is the great theme of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church just a few years later. "I keep asking" he writes, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, *so that you may know him better.*" Not only that, but Paul prayed that the Ephesian Christians would know that they had been chosen by God before the creation of the world to be his beloved children on whom he had lavished his grace and love.

Its a message that speaks to us in our times. As our way of life gets challenged and shaken, our identity comes from Christ, from knowing him through prayer and worship and through his word. At times of large change, knowing who we are matters hugely. Paul's message then is God's message to us today: we are first and foremost children of God, loved by him and made for relationship with him. Nothing that we can experience can change that.

It is worth noting that as the city of Ephesus reeled from the challenges of the gospel message, not all rejected the message. Many did come to believe, and a thriving church was established. And those who came to faith valued their new-found identity in Christ, their relationship with God so highly, they were willing to sacrifice a great deal for it. Luke tells us that many burned their pagan sorcery scrolls, worth 50,000 drachma (or three to four million pounds in today's money), as they turned from their old lives to embrace Christ fully.

Many sacrifices may be asked of us in the coming weeks and months as we seek to love God and neighbour in these challenging times. Standing up for the common good, rejecting the desire to blame and shame, not putting our own financial concerns before those in even greater need, will ask much of all of us. But knowing that we are loved by God, knowing that our identity comes from being his children, will give us all the strength and hope we need.

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