

Sermon: Sunday 17th May, 2020

A Journey of Discovery - Acts 20

Over the last few weeks as a family we have been watching the BBC's Race Across the World on iPlayer. If you haven't seen it, it's a travel challenge programme. Five pairs of people have to get from one destination to another, thousands of miles apart, on a limited budget and with no internet access to guide them. The first series took people from London to Singapore; the second series from Mexico City to the southern tip of South America. In the series, you get to see the beautiful scenery that they travel through, but actually, what the journeys are more about is the relationships of the people: the squabbling siblings, the hitherto estranged relatives, the couple coming to terms with the husband's hearing loss, and so on. Seeing people journeying together, through the challenges and stresses of their trip, gives us a window into who they are, what they are like.

Our reading from the book of Acts this morning takes us on an even longer journey, not so much in terms of distance, but in terms of time, and during that journey we gain insights into the life of Paul - the kind of person he was, what made him tick - that maybe we have not seen before. And seeing what Paul is like, this man who, for all his flaws, was so widely respected in the early church, may help us to reflect on our own Christian lives today.

Last week, we had left Paul in Ephesus, a city in western Turkey where he had been for over two and a half years, and where a huge riot had broken out against him. Prudently, he chooses to leave the city fairly soon afterwards, but before he goes, we are told he "encourages" the church there. He heads over to northern Greece to visit the churches of Philippi and Berea and Thessalonica, and Luke tells us that as he travelled through the area, he "spoke many words of encouragement to the people".

Encouragement was one of the hallmarks of Paul's ministry. We see it in his letters too. He writes to the church in Philippi: "I thank my God every time I remember you"; to the church in Ephesus: "Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you"; and to the church in Colossae: "We always thank God when we pray for you because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for the saints." Encouragement, that act of giving someone support, confidence and hope, of building people up, of seeing the good in their lives and affirming it, should be the hallmark of all our lives. When did you last encourage someone, affirm them for something they have done, or appreciate their faith in God or their love for others? Maybe after this service, when you give someone a ring or talk to someone in your own household, think of how you can encourage them, affirm them, build them up.

We also see in Paul on this journey a passionate desire to grow in the Christian faith and to help others to do so as well. We see this in his time in Troas, the Turkish port where he spends a week as he begins the long journey back from Greece along the Turkish coastline heading for Jerusalem.

The Troas church cannot have been very large - it was meeting in a third storey tenement flat - and yet he spends a week with them, and on his last night with them, he preaches on and on until midnight, he has so much he wants to share with them. This is not quite so cruel as it may seem. There were no Sundays, and the members of the church who were slaves, of which Eutychus was almost certainly one, would have been working till late into the evening everyday. (No wonder he fell asleep!) This was the only time they had available. Indeed, the Roman governor Pliny, 50 years later, would complain of Christians "meeting before dawn", finding the only time they had to meet, even if it meant missing sleep. Paul had a hunger to share and the local Christians had a deep hunger to learn more about the Christian faith. Are we similar? Do we have that desire to grow in our faith, even if that means having to create more time in our busy lives? The early church did it by meeting through the night. I wonder how each of us can do it?

A good opportunity to start this week will be by joining in with Thy Kingdom Come, giving some

more time in your day to read, reflect and pray.

For prayer was a hallmark of Paul's life too. We caught a glimpse of that from some of the quotes from his letters. But we see it too on this journey. Luke, almost as an aside, mentions that when they left Troas, Paul took the next stage of the journey alone on foot. Everyone else went by boat. It reminds me of the pattern of Jesus. After a time of busy ministry, he would find time alone, to pray, often up in the wilderness, while his disciples went to their boats.

For some of us, this time of lockdown has been a period of enforced "alone-ness". For others, sharing a household 24 hours a day with others may have meant we have had less time alone than normal. However our experience has been, can I encourage each of us to find some time this week to take some time out to pray, to seek God out. This week I will be sending out links to some resources connected to Thy Kingdom Come that you may find helpful in doing just that.

Paul arrives further down the coast in the port of Miletus. He is keen to meet up with the leaders of the church in Ephesus, but does not want to get delayed by going there. Maybe he is afraid of prompting another riot and getting incarcerated, or maybe he is afraid the many friends he has made there will inevitably detain him by the warmth of their hospitality. So he asks the leaders to come to him, and he gives them his parting words, for he doesn't expect he will see them again.

One of the things he shares with them is a desire that they see his ministry for what it was. In those days, many people made a living by being travelling preachers, going from town to town promoting a certain philosophy or belief, and getting donations, today's equivalent of city centre buskers. Paul is anxious that they know that this was never his intention. His motivation was never about money - indeed he points out that he worked incredibly hard among them so that he would not be a burden on anyone. Indeed, he worked hard enough that he could support the poor. His actions matched his words.

For all of us, that challenge is for us too, to live lives of integrity. That what we speak is matched by how we live. Paul knew that his words would very quickly count for nothing if people did not see a consistency with his actions, and that is true for us too. If we say we are people of hope, let us live as such. If we say we are people of love, let us live as such. Part of the reason Paul's message had so much impact in the early church was because his life matched his message.

Paul's life, as we've seen on this journey, was characterised by encouragement, a desire to grow in faith and share that faith with others, a reliance on prayer, and a life of integrity, doing what one talked about.

Such a life was not easy, and he recognised that many challenges, including prison and hardships, lay ahead. But knowing that this was the life God had called him to gave him the strength to persevere. He wanted, in his words, to finish the race, to complete the task. Our race, unlike the BBC programme, is not across the world, its here in our own homes, in our own communities. It will involve sacrifice but it also comes with great rewards. So let us live encouraging, faith-filled, prayerful lives, filled with integrity, today.

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