

SERMON, 10 JULY 2021 – Ephesians 2.11-end, Mark 6.30-34,53-end



A reminder that we are reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians over the next few weeks, so a reminder that, if you read Acts 19, you'll see that Paul came to Ephesus from Corinth, and in the synagogue he met a group of people who were disciples of John the Baptist. John had baptised them, but the next stage, faith in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, had not happened. Paul teaches them, prays with them, blesses them, the Spirit comes upon them, and new Christians are born. Like nearly every other Christian in Ephesus at the time they still see themselves as Jews, and they meet in the synagogue and worship there.



The Preaching of Saint Paul at Ephesus, Eustache Le Sueur, 1649

We are told that Paul “entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” Residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord – so the Christian church was changing and developing.



Paul was also standing against the Roman and Greek gods, specifically the worship of the great Diana – also known as Artemis. Ephesus was a city of stunning temples, a lot of business connected with that religion and its practice. In Acts 19, as I said last week, we are told that Demetrius the silver smith stirs up a riot against Paul, after all, his preaching and teaching are turning people away from the worship of Diana, they've stopped buying the statues and the trinkets, and the economic basis of the town is being undermined. You can imagine the police on the streets, the fear, the violence – and Paul is persuaded to leave the town. And when he left, he left a Christian community very different to what it had been when he had arrived two years earlier.



I suspect those changes had continued, as men and women from both Jewish and Greek backgrounds came to faith – that Christian community was not going to be a static one, it was going to be one that was focussed on proclaiming good news, bringing people to faith. This letter was probably written five or six years after he left the town, and he had obviously kept in touch with them. He knew the divisions.

You Gentiles, you people from outside the Jewish faith, you need to know to remember that you were far from God. He was not part of your heritage, your

lives. You were far from him. You need to come in, to find the hope and the peace that faith in God brings, the new life of Christ.



There is a message in this for all of us. We are surrounded by people who have no real understanding of God, of what it means to have a close relationship with him, to have close relationships in a church community. We can shrug our shoulders, suggest that everyone can have their own way of living – or we can say that we believe Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We can talk about why we believe faith matters, we can talk about the power of God in our lives, and the difference being a Christian makes to our lives. Surely coming to church on a Sunday must be positive for you – otherwise you wouldn't come – so tell people why you find it positive. Most people don't believe that anyone comes to church these days – so tell them you do, and tell them why. People cannot believe that church has gone on-line – tell people where they can find us, and why your hour on zoom or youtube helps you get through the rest of the week.



I went to a zoom lecture on Wednesday about having your church building open. It was led and promoted by Ecclesiastical Insurance – our insurance company telling us why they want church buildings open from dawn to dusk. They said they pay less claims from open buildings than from those which are locked – because open churches tend to have people around, wandering in and out, they are seen as alive and welcoming, and that deters the criminal. Our country has been through a period of trauma, is continuing to go through a period of trauma – and our buildings should be places of calm, peace, prayer, places to recharge, places to enter. The message was that they don't need to be

staffed – unlock in the morning, lock in the evening, checked during the day by whoever walks past. Covid must not be used as an excuse either – provide hand gel, wipe surfaces down regularly. Yes we were told, take sensible precautions – don't leave the best silver out – but insurance, again and again they said, insurance, is enabling – it enables you to use your building for mission, it enables you to be welcoming. To share our Christian heritage, to give a Christian welcome, to point to the love of God, the purpose of Christ. A challenge there for us.



And Paul is addressing the divisions in the Ephesian church, the division of race and background. Those from a good Jewish background, men and women who had kept the Law since they were children, they were unsure about these new people, people from a different background, people with different traditions and heritage. It is something has plagued the Christian church ever since, and still plagues us today. How many villages do you drive round and you pass a Wesleyan Methodist church, a Primitive Methodist church, a Baptist church, a Strict and Particular Baptist church, a Congregation chapel – etc etc. Of course, I can feel smug, as an Anglican were probably there first, and these days we're often the only church building left – but what does it say about us, that so many others built their own chapels because they didn't feel welcome in the parish church. How sad it is that Christian communities, even communities from the same denomination, don't bother to talk to others of their own community. We would rather do the work twice than do it together, we would rather see it fail than work together and make it stronger. And when someone else does the work and offers us support – do we happily say thanks and join in, or do we stand on the sidelines and say “we wouldn't have done it like that?”. I am decidedly fed up with the fact that the Church of England Covid guidelines were not issued until 5 pm on Friday – but it would be more positive of me to say “thanks for doing your best, this is a good basis for us to work with”, rather than thinking “incompetent fools”.



It is, of course, not just Christians who fail. Most of us have very little experience of racism, but you read the responses made to England's footballers, and realise how much evil is out there. Isn't it fascinating that some of those who condemned footballers taking the knee as a protest against racism, have now realised how much racism is out there. There was one politician, and I honestly can't remember which one, who was sounding off a few months ago about how "An Englishman should only kneel to his Queen and his God" – I thought then that we also kneel, we bow our heads, when we ask God's forgiveness, not just for our sins, but for the sins of this society of which we are part. We kneel too when we want to put ourselves on a level with others. Julie appreciates it when people bend their knees and come down to her level, when you talk to children, how much better to come to their level.



As I've said before, I've always served churches in posh, white areas of England, and I don't find it easy when I'm out of my comfort zone. My first real experience of multi-cultural Britain was when Gareth was first ill, and he was rushed from Suffolk to Guy's Hospital in London. I went from a hospital where most staff had the same colour skin, to one where all races and nationalities were represented. It was a shock, and I found it hard. I remember being rather rude to the chap on Enquiries who had a strong accent, I was struggling to understand him, and I was stressed because I knew Gareth had arrived in the hospital by emergency ambulance an hour or so earlier, and I didn't know where he was. The chap was trying to find out, he was trying to tell me, and my angry thoughts towards him were influenced by the colour of his skin. In fact he was on the 14th floor of that tower, and a multi-cultural team was already hard at work trying to keep him alive. I was very pleased that a night or two later, when I was sitting in the all-night café in the hospital foyer having escaped from Intensive Care for a while, this chap came over, introduced himself to me, and asked after my son. I shall never forget that love, and that unspoken forgiveness, for the rest of my life.



Citizens with the saints, members of the household of God – that takes effort, love, prayer, forgiveness. But we can do it, because we are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, on the foundation of love and service in our churches over so many years – and Christ is our cornerstone.

“In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.”

That is the Good News we proclaim. To Christ be praise and glory. Amen.

Peter Barham, 17 July 2021