

## Sermon - 05/07/20

“Paul in Ephesus” – by Tony Coulson

Write upon our hearts, O Lord God,  
the lessons of your holy Word,  
and grant that we may be doers of the same  
and not forgetful hearers only,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

As we journey through the Acts of the Apostles going in our imagination alongside St. Paul, we must feel caught up in the excitement of it all. This was the Good News of Jesus being taken on from one place to another in the countries we now call Turkey and Greece. We pick up the story today with Paul leaving Corinth, that bustling seaport in southern Greece – leaving in company with his new friends, Priscilla and Aquila who were fellow leather workers. They landed at Ephesus where Paul went into the synagogue and entered into discussion with the Jews there, who would have liked him to have stayed longer, but he wanted to hurry on, promising to come back, “if it is God’s will” he said.

He sailed from Ephesus and went to Caesarea and then to Antioch, and travelled back to some of the places in Asia Minor – that is Turkey – to see how the little Christian fellowships were doing in those places where he had preached earlier. I wonder if he went to his home town of Tarsus. It would have been on his route. It would have given him the opportunity to see his family – perhaps to try and convince them of the truth about Jesus.

Almost as though it is in brackets, we are told about a man named Apollos, an enthusiastic follower of John the Baptist, who turned up in Ephesus and was instructed by Aquila and Priscilla and so became a committed follower of Jesus before going on to Corinth.

Paul's quick tour of some of the fellowships of Asia Minor ended with his visit to Ephesus, where he was to spend some two or three years. It was a time of great activity, of excitement seeing God at work in remarkable ways; a time of tremendous intellectual activity for I think it was there at Ephesus that Paul wrote I Corinthians before a brief visit to Corinth, and then, when back in Ephesus, wrote Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians . You may be surprised at the idea of Paul writing the letter to the Ephesians from Ephesus but I believe that the so-called letter to the Ephesians was a circular letter to several churches, and that because a copy bearing the words 'in Ephesus' has survived, it is called 'Ephesians' , but you will notice in your Bible that there is probably a note at chapter 1 verse 1 against the words 'to the saints in Ephesus', saying 'some early manuscripts do not have 'in Ephesus''. So, as I say, I think it was a circular letter.

Early in Paul's long visit to Ephesus, he met some disciples who, when he asked them about their experience of the Holy Spirit, said "we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit", but they were clearly more eager to discover the reality of the Holy Spirit in their lives than someone I heard of years ago bringing their child for baptism and saying to the Vicar "I don't believe in the Holy Ghost and all that caper"!

Paul went back to the synagogue and spent three months talking and discussing there, but the opposition was such that he then started daily discussions in a lecture hall, and this went on for two years. At the same time there were some remarkable signs – people were healed of their sicknesses, even by contact with handkerchiefs and aprons that Paul had touched. And some people who thought they could use some of Paul's power for their own purposes found themselves supernaturally attacked. We are not actually told that Paul was imprisoned at Ephesus but it seems likely. And it was from prison, I believe, that he wrote those letters.

But that is not the only thing we are not told. We are not told why when he wrote II Corinthians he was so upset – even depressed. That doesn't sound like the Paul we are getting to know – singing in

prison, unstoppable in his proclamation of the Gospel and incidentally being so positive about that Good News that he didn't spend time condemning paganism. After the great riot at Ephesus, the city clerk managed to calm the crowd down saying "You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess". They had not done that – they hadn't needed to, for the craftsmen who made the idols of the many-breasted goddess Diana realised the implication of Paul's preaching was that "man-made gods are no gods at all", and the crowd were stirred up to repeat at the top of their voices the slogan "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" or, if you prefer the Greek, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians".

No, there was nothing in all that to depress a man like Paul. His friends only just managed to stop him going to face the crowd in the theatre and perhaps being trampled to death. No, there must have been something else which made him write in such an uncharacteristic way II Corinthians or at least the first part of it. In chapter one of that letter, Paul talks about "the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all troubles", verses which I heard quoted at the beginning of the lockdown for the pandemic – but he continues "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death." We don't know for certain what this is about, but we have to admit that he sounds very depressed. He felt absolutely crushed. If he really was imprisoned in Ephesus and these words were written a little afterwards, perhaps on the journey back through Greece, that could have affected him. But far more likely, Paul was bitterly upset by the breakdown of his relationship with the Church in Corinth. He had been told that there were personality cults spoiling the fellowship. Some thought Paul was great, others said "I follow Apollos" and others "I follow Cephas" – that is Peter.

The well known biblical scholar, Tom Wright, says "There must have been a deeper sense of personal hurt. He was the one who had told them about Jesus in the first place. He had rejoiced as the Spirit

worked powerfully among the new believers. He had loved them, prayed with them, worked among them, wept with them...He was made to feel decidedly unwelcome. He found it best to leave in a hurry. It was suggested to him – and unless you have been a pastor yourself you will not know just how deeply this would be – that if he ever wanted to come back, he would have to have letters of recommendation from someone the Corinthians trusted.”

Changed circumstances can suddenly catch us out and lead us to depression.

I wonder how many people at the beginning of the pandemic said “Nothing like this has happened before.” I read recently an article about the Great Plague of London in 1665. In September of that year – just one month – the Rector of St. Brides Fleet Street buried 636 people. Their names are in the burial register, except that some were unidentified and record says simply ‘a child from Kingshead Ally’ or ‘a man from New Street’. The symptoms of bubonic plague were horrific; the recovery rate was effectively nil. That must have been depressing indeed. And some of us heard on St James’ Radio a reminder from Bishop Olivia, the Bishop of Reading, that there are those in the world today whose situation sounds depressing indeed. She said “Social distancing and hand washing are not helpful advice when families are crammed fifteen to a tent in refugee camps, and the township has only one tap for hundreds of families.”

“We were under great pressure” wrote St. Paul, “far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.”

As we follow that remarkable Christian on his journey, we realise that he too had times when he felt down, but we take courage by hearing him say by the end of the letter that he has heard the Lord telling him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” That is why Paul says “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is

why, for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak then I am strong.”

That was Paul's discovery, and it can be ours too as in all the changing circumstances of life we learn to trust not in ourselves but in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ alone, Cornerstone  
Weak made strong in the Saviour's love  
Through the storm, He is Lord  
Lord of all.