

2023-09-17 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Ezekiel 20: 1-8, 33-44; Acts 20: 17-end

Another of Paul's long speeches – certain phrases did catch my eye as possible starting points for this evening and we'll come back to those – but things only began to get interesting for me when I started to read the bit before to put it into context, the earlier part of tonight's chapter and then back to the previous one which we heard last week – and then a penny dropped – and apologies for my being slow in this regard – this is the story of the beginning of the church that the letter to the Ephesians was written – that seemed interesting!!

So let's start with Ephesus – a great port city on the western sea board of Asia – already 1100 years old when Paul arrives. For more than 500 years it had been the centre of the worship of the Goddess Artemis, goddess of the hunt, chastity, childbirth, wild animals and the wilderness. The temple built 300 years before, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, was one of the Seven Wonders of the World, (and a little bit of which can be found in the British Museum). During the 80 years prior to Paul's arrival Ephesus had become an important centre of commerce in the Roman empire, second only to Rome and was the gateway between Rome and the Asian territories.

It played a large part in the early spread of Christianity and I read that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is thought to have spent her last years in Ephesus with Saint John. Her house and John's tomb can be visited there today.

Paul's first visit to Ephesus seems to be at the end of his second missionary journey when he's headed to Jerusalem from Corinth. It wasn't a long visit, he went to the synagogue and held discussions with the Jews there but then left, telling them he hoped to come back one day. He did leave his fellow tentmakers Priscilla and Aquila there though. We then hear about a Greek Jew called Apollos who was teaching about Jesus but whom, we are told, only knew the baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila taught him more and encouraged him to fulfil his ambition to work for the church in Corinth.

Paul then came back to Ephesus – and this is the story we had last week – he found a group of about 12 disciples who he baptised in the name of Jesus and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. For about three months he spoke exclusively to the Jews but getting frustrated he then moved into a public hall and spent the next two years talking to those who came and performing extraordinary miracles. Luke tells us that: **'all those who lived in Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.'** Quite a feat! There were some quite remarkable events and the **'word increased and grew'**.

But after some trouble with the followers of the Goddess Artemis Paul set off again on his travels around Macedonia and Greece.

His eventual route back to Jerusalem could have taken him via Ephesus but he was clockwatching so he got the church elders to meet him about 50 miles south in Miletus. Our passage is a farewell one and ends with a hugely emotional scene.

Paul hands over responsibility for the churches – probably house churches – that they lead in Ephesus.

Each of us has a responsibility for part of God's kingdom, each of us is placed in a unique situation and it is our job to tell the Word of God in that place. What Paul tells the elders is also teaching for us.

The first thing that stands out for me is that it is hard work! Paul speaks of never stopping day and night.

What Paul says to them first though is to look after themselves, and to look after their flock. He tells them that they must stay alert because they will be attacked by people trying to break up their churches. He has told them that what he did was to always tell them God's truth, even when it was tough to do so and they must emulate that. And finally, they must strive to help the weak.

And so the baton of Godly leadership in Ephesus is handed on as it has been handed on around the world and from one generation to the next ever since.

But Paul's coaching has not completely ended – the letter to the Ephesians, although probably more of a **PTO**

round robin to the churches of Asia which perhaps ended up in a library in Ephesus, and maybe written a handful of years later by Paul from prison in Rome or perhaps by another of the early Christian senior leaders in Paul's name some few years after Paul's death – shows a continuing care for the Ephesian Christians and their communities.

Likewise, we are not abandoned to a solo task as a disciple, not by God and not by the wider Christian community – we even have the benefit of Paul's wisdom so many years after it was first given – but God still needs us to put the effort in. Much as we might want to leave it to someone else, that doesn't seem to be an option!

'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.'

Eph 1 17-19

'I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he (God) may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Eph 3 15-21

'Peace be to the whole community,^[e] and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Eph 6 23-24

Amen.