

2026-09-13 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

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

One of the things that makes me uneasy about Paul is that I worry that if I was alive in the first century, that I would have been repelled by his intenseness and zeal and might have missed out on the Good News as a result.

The ferocity and urgency of his message seems not to take into account the knowledge of lived experience – not to take into account the inconsistencies of the human heart, the joys and sadnesses of the cycle of life, the successes and failures, the good and bad decisions and the consequences that they lead to.

And yet Paul did of course know all these things, both in his own life and by observing them in the lives of others and I think we see a glimpse of his understanding, maybe even compassion for those he pastors in this passage.

Paul is headed for Jerusalem and he's trying to get there for Pentecost so there are time constraints. His journey started in Corinth in North East Greece and he has headed around the coastline of the Aegean Sea sometimes on land and sometimes by boat via Philippi and Troas, and now in Miletus in modern day Turkey.

Miletus is about 30 miles, perhaps two or three days walking, south of Ephesus. For some reason Paul chose not to stop at Ephesus itself – perhaps to do with the time constraints and perhaps to do with the safety of the large collection of money he and his companions are taking to Jerusalem.

Ephesus was of course somewhere Paul knew really well. He'd lived there for two years or so, a time which had seen an exciting growth in the church there and where no doubt close friendships and working relationships had been forged.

I say church but it wasn't one single worshipping community but a group of house churches and Paul has asked the leaders of these churches to travel to Miletus to meet him.

In this passage we learn how Paul went about his ministry – and boy! what a standard he sets for Christian ministers.

Now this definitely sounds like boasting to our ears at first hearing. I'm pretty sure that that isn't what it's about.

First, let's look at what he describes.

He lived as part of the community. He served the Lord with all humility – his work wasn't about creating a church of Paul but of pointing the way to Jesus. He talks about the downs of the time – the difficulties that had to be endured as the Jews attacked the young religion and the tears that were shed because it was hard.

He put himself out to be helpful – to do whatever was needed to support the community and the people who belonged to it.

He spoke of Jesus and taught about God both in public and in all of the house churches so that both Jews and Greeks should hear the message of repentance and faith.

On top of that he worked – presumably at tent-making or something similar – he says it was work with his hands – he worked to financially support himself and his companions. In that way he was able to stay independent and unaccountable to any human master.

He and his companions clearly lived simply because he talks about not seeking riches but about the importance of supporting the weak and of obeying Jesus who he tells us said 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'

Paul has gathered this group of elders – probably men and women because Aquila and his wife Priscilla are named elsewhere as leaders in Ephesus – a group that he must surely have great tenderness for because of

their shared experiences – he’s gathered them to say goodbye to them. He’s headed for Jerusalem where he’s expecting to face imprisonment and persecutions, but his ongoing plans are to head for Rome and then Spain. His time in this area known as Asia has come to an end.

PTO

He’s passing the baton.

This group will have seen and experienced Paul’s zeal at first hand. But they also saw the more intimate side of him, they will have seen his handiwork and known how fine it was, they will have known his favourite food, they will have seen his kindness to the needy, they will have known what made him laugh. In believing that they had love for him, perhaps I can look beyond the man of zeal who unnerves me so.

He’s telling them that they have to step up and manage without him as their backstop. He’s reminding them how they will need to conduct themselves to keep a clear conscience so that they can withstand the savage wolves, the backbiting, the challenges to their leadership, the showmen instead of shepherds who will disrupt the harmony of their groups.

Before he leaves them he prays for them and no doubt they for him.

Our ministers need our prayers. Their task is never an easy one.

But we are part of the priesthood of all believers, we are part of the commission to tell the Good News, to tell the stories of our faith – the stories from history and the stories of how our faith affects us and our lives.

We, too, like the elders of Ephesus, need to take Paul as an exemplar. But Paul talks about finishing HIS course in **v24** – our course will be unique in some ways – the common thread is that it’s about being present for Jesus and glorifying Jesus. We will find our own life by valuing Jesus’s life more than our own.

Amen