

## “A POSTCARD FROM EPHEBUS”

*Acts 19:1-16*

Well, we've got to the end of the summer holidays – and we've got to the end of this little series in which we've been following Paul's journeys around the Mediterranean. Each week we've looked at a postcard Paul sent from somewhere on his missionary journeys around Turkey and Greece, back to the Christians who met in Jerusalem under the leadership of James the brother of Jesus and Bishop of that city. Of course, Paul hasn't been on holiday – although, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, he has taken the opportunity to have a look round some of the great cities such as Athens. Paul has been engaged in a project to communicate the good news about Jesus Christ to as many people as he possibly could. And this week we find him back in Ephesus. (It was a city that bore a great similarity to Thessalonica, some of you noticed!)

Writing back to the folk in Jerusalem, Paul tells them that he has taken the opportunity of Apollos' trip to Corinth to keep his promise and return to this amazing city (*18:21*) where he meets a bunch of disciples and helps them to become followers of Jesus. Ephesus was a very important place at this time. It was the chief city of the Roman province of Asia and sat on a highly important trade route. Today, the remains of the city are some distance inland, but then it was a port at the mouth of the River Cayster, through which most of the traffic into Asia from the Mediterranean and Aegean came. There was a magnificent Temple to Artemis, a powerful fertility goddess, and Paul's attempts at preaching the gospel led to a riot by the people who made a living selling souvenirs at the Temple. (We're not going to look at that this morning, but you can read about it in the second part of this chapter.) There was also a wonderful theatre – the picture on the front of this card – at which the plays of the great Greek playwrights would have been produced: Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Aeschylus.

But Paul, as always, wanted to get down to telling people about Jesus. That had been his primary focus throughout his journeys around the Mediterranean. And what we read of his efforts here is broadly similar to what happened elsewhere. As always, Luke (who wrote this account of the beginnings of the Church) chooses to highlight certain things – and we can learn something from what he does include here, something that might be of use to us as we try to continue in 21<sup>st</sup> century Lichfield the work that started with those first enthusiastic evangelists nearly two millennia ago. The commission of Jesus, which the early disciples took up with such fervour, still applies today. We are still called as followers of Jesus to share his words and his love with as many people as we possibly can. And, as men and women are still pretty well the same today in what motivates them and what interests them as they were in Paul's day, we can expect some of the same situations to occur.

Firstly, Paul **encounters opposition**. He encounters it amongst the Jewish people to whom he first of all takes the message. As always, Paul goes along to the synagogue and uses the weekly meetings there to explain how Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecies and promises of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament). In Ephesus he seems to be able to keep going longer than usual – three weeks is about the limit normally, but here it is three months (*v9*) before they start to get “*obstinate*” and publicly criticise “*the Way*” (as Luke refers to the path of Christian discipleship). So, again as usual, Paul goes and starts up somewhere else – on this occasion in a public lecture hall, using it during the siesta period (11am – 4pm according to some manuscripts) when Tyrannus would not be lecturing and most people would not be at their regular work.

The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ has never been without opposition. There will always be those who want to denigrate the message or the messengers. Jesus himself told his disciples that they would encounter difficulties as they told others about him and about the grace of God. We should not be surprised if there are those (usually a minority) who want to make life difficult for us as we try to carry out Jesus' commission. But, as we shall see, there is no reason to give up, because the rewards are greater than the problems.

The problems are not confined to outright opposition, though. Paul also **encountered counterfeits** as well. There were those who were going around trying to imitate what Paul was doing, but without the power and authority that came from Jesus. In *vv14ff* we read the curious story of the Sons of Sceva, who were trying to replicate what the disciples of Jesus were doing, but who were actually conning people. They were using a very mechanistic approach and playing on the superstitions of the people. In the end, it was the very evil spirits themselves that ended up causing the problem.

The problem of charlatans and con artists has never gone away and there are still those today who use their powers to hoodwink people into believing them, but who are by no means exercising gifts and authority that come from Jesus. To begin with, these people may well seem very sincere and good, but eventually the spirits with whom they are playing start to cause problems. Those who peddle their wares as psychics and other non-Christian spiritual experts may be able to help folk for a short while, but in the end the problems simply multiply. Let us not be mistaken: there is a supernatural, spiritual world which has an effect on our lives and if we are meddling with spiritual forces that are not from God, then the consequences can be very unfortunate. One of the most cunning ways in which the devil tries to undermine the integrity and the effectiveness of the disciples of Jesus is by setting up imitations, which is why Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica, “*Test everything. Hold on to the good*” (*1 Thessalonians 5:21*). C S Lewis’s entertaining book *The Screwtape Letters* is all about this if you fancy a good read.

But, apart from things to be wary of, this episode in Ephesus also shows us two things that we need if we are to be effective as disciples of Jesus sharing the good news about the love of God. And, as we’ve looked at the other postcards from Paul, these things have been lurking in the background of all the stories in *Acts*. We’ve already remarked on the fact that Paul spent much longer in the synagogue at Ephesus than he did elsewhere. He spoke there for three months – and then spent another two years in the public lecture hall: two years “*having discussions daily*”. Paul realised that if the gospel was to make any headway, it was going to need some **hard graft**. He was going to have to stick at it, despite the opposition, despite the imitations, despite the problems that it threw up for him. He stuck at it and it bore fruit.

I often meet up with colleagues who, every time you see them, are embarking on some new initiative. Every few months they are trying something new. And I come across those who get terribly discouraged if what they are trying doesn’t immediately bring results. I think, with some of them (and this has been researched by academics), it’s the fact that they had jobs before they entered the ministry which were highly dependent on getting results quickly. And I know that there are some of you who get frustrated when your friends and family don’t suddenly turn to Jesus as soon as you tell them about him. If it took Paul more than two years to get anywhere, then we need to be a little more patient than we sometimes are.

We read stories of revivals and great movements of God’s Spirit through history and assume that, because it only takes up a few pages in the book, that they happened very quickly. But such movements came only after years of prayer and preaching. It took a long time for such things to happen – and a great deal of hard work. I was talking earlier in the week to someone who had planted a church not too far from here – a very successful church now – and he was telling us of the patience and hard work that was needed in the early days. I recall a preacher at the church where I grew up telling the story of a missionary in Taiwan who put out the chairs in his little house church every Sunday for two years before anyone even turned up. Jesus never promised us an easy ride or a quick fix as his disciples. Be patient. Keep witnessing. Keep praying. Keep believing – because if God has put something on your heart, he will see it through.

And the other vital ingredient in all this – as in all the stories that Luke recounts in *Acts* – is the **Holy Spirit**. Paul’s stay in Ephesus begins with this apparently very curious episode with the people whom Luke calls “*disciples*”, but who are clearly not disciples of Jesus. Why do I say that? Well, for one thing they have not been baptised as disciples of Jesus, only by John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance. And secondly, they have never heard of the Holy Spirit, which the rest of the New Testament – and, indeed,

Jesus himself – clearly tells us is an absolutely essential element of Christian experience. These people are sincere in their belief in God. They have demonstrated their recognition that they need to be put right with God through their repentance. They have undergone some kind of initiation in their baptism by John. But they have not yet fully committed themselves to Jesus and have not yet received the Holy Spirit. This isn't some kind of second stage of becoming a Christian: the Holy Spirit isn't something for advanced believers only. So Paul ensures that they are sincere in their desire to follow Jesus, baptises them, and at that point the Holy Spirit obviously fills them – in this case that is clear from their speaking in tongues and their prophesying.

I suspect there are many people like that in our churches today: good, sincere people who believe in God, who recognise their need to repent, to make a new start, who want to follow Jesus. They may even have been prepared to put in the hard graft and get involved in the life of the Church. But they've never taken that step of real commitment. Maybe they've never wanted to be baptised as a disciple of Jesus. Maybe they've never really received the power that God has for them through his Holy Spirit.

Paul spotted what was needed in the lives of these Ephesians and once they had received the Holy Spirit, once Paul had started to put in the hard work, once the grace of God and the graft of the disciples had been married together, things started to happen. More and more people heard the gospel (v10) and God started to do miraculous things through Paul – miracles that even for that time were “*extraordinary*” (v11).

Don't you long for that kind of thing to happen here, today? For more and more people to hear the gospel? For miraculous things to happen in our community? Do you long to be used by God and to be a part of the growth of his Kingdom where you are? Maybe you're one of those people who hasn't yet taken that final step of commitment. Maybe you're someone who has done that – many times, even – but you feel this morning that you need God to touch you with his Holy Spirit once again. Well, you can pray for that in the words of our final song this morning – “*Lord, I come to you, let my heart be changed, renewed... unveil my eyes ... renew my mind.*” And as we sing that, it may be that God is saying that you should actually seek the touch of his Holy Spirit here and now. Come down here to the front and we'll pray for you, that God's Holy Spirit will come upon you today. Maybe you want to seek that for the first time. Maybe you want to indicate that you want to be baptised in the name of Jesus. Maybe you want to commit yourself to hard graft for the Kingdom of God. Just come to the front as we sing. And if you want to explore it a bit more then please have a word with me or Liz over coffee afterwards (or, if you're reading this on the Internet, please feel free to get in touch via e-mail).

*Discussion notes on next page.*

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Paul has kept his promise and return to the city of Ephesus. At this time it was the chief city of the Roman province of Asia and sat on a highly important trade route. It was a port at the mouth of the River Cayster, through which most of the traffic into Asia from the Mediterranean and Aegean came. There was a magnificent Temple to Artemis, a powerful fertility goddess (Paul's attempts at preaching the gospel led to a riot by the people who made a living selling souvenirs at the Temple). There was also a wonderful theatre. But Paul wanted to get down to telling people about Jesus, his primary focus throughout his journeys around the Mediterranean.

Firstly, Paul **encounters opposition** amongst the Jewish people to whom he first of all takes the message. They start to get "*obstinate*" and publicly criticise "*the Way*" (as Luke refers to the path of Christian discipleship). So Paul goes and starts up somewhere else – in a public lecture hall. The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ has never been without opposition. There will always be those who want to denigrate the message or the messengers.

Paul also **encountered counterfeits**. There were those who were going around trying to imitate what Paul was doing, but without the power and authority that came from Jesus. In *v14ff* we read the story of the Sons of Sceva. In the end, it was the very evil spirits themselves that ended up causing the problem. There are still those today who use their powers to hoodwink people into believing them, but who are by no means exercising gifts and authority that come from Jesus but if we are meddling with spiritual forces that are not from God, then the consequences can be very unfortunate.

But this episode in Ephesus also shows us two things that we need if we are to be effective as disciples. Paul spoke in the synagogue for three months – and then spent another two years in the public lecture hall: two years "*having discussions daily*". Paul realised that if the gospel was to make any headway, it was going to need some **hard graft**. If it took Paul more than two years to get anywhere, then we need to be a little more patient than we sometimes are. Jesus never promised us an easy ride or a quick fix as his disciples. Be patient. Keep witnessing. Keep praying. Keep believing – because if God has put something on your heart, he will see it through.

The other vital ingredient is the **Holy Spirit**. Paul's stay in Ephesus begins with the people whom Luke calls "*disciples*", but who are clearly not disciples of Jesus. They have not been baptised as disciples of Jesus. And they have never heard of the Holy Spirit, which is an absolutely essential element of Christian experience. These people are sincere in their belief in God. They have demonstrated their repentance. They have undergone some kind of initiation in their baptism by John. But they have not yet fully committed themselves to Jesus nor received the Holy Spirit. So Paul ensures that they are sincere in their desire to follow Jesus, baptises them, and at that point the Holy Spirit obviously fills them.

There are many people who are good, sincere people, who believe in God, who recognise their need to repent, to make a new start, who want to follow Jesus. They may even have been involved in the life of the Church. But they've never taken that step of real commitment. Maybe they've never wanted to be baptised as a disciple of Jesus nor received the power that God has for them through his Holy Spirit.

Paul spotted what was needed in the lives of these Ephesians and once the grace of God and the graft of the disciples had been married together, things started to happen. More and more people heard the gospel (*v10*) and God started to do miraculous things through Paul – miracles that even for that time were "*extraordinary*" (*v11*).

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Think back over the "postcards" we've read. What are the main points of Paul's missionary strategy?
2. Does the story of the disciples at Ephesus (*v1-7*) imply that receiving the Holy Spirit is a second stage in our discipleship? Why/why not?
3. Why is "hard graft" so important in our mission? Does it imply that God can't do things any quicker? What lessons do we learn through our hard work?
4. What was the problem with the Sons of Sceva? Can you think of any contemporary parallels?
5. Is there anything that has particularly struck you during this series? How can it help us in our mission as a church?