

Acts 18:19 - 19:20
After a faltering start ...

Think back to the end of last year. Although it was clear that **CoronaVirus** levels were rising across the country, Cornwall was one of very few regions that retained **Tier One** status. Now it's the very opposite. We're now supposed to have the **highest levels** of infection in the country - and for once, I concede that it probably is fair to blame the **emnets**.

So even the **staycation**, which we've been hearing for so long will be the only safe way to holiday this year, *isn't*. So, all the more, join with me once more for the final one of our **virtual visits** to no, not even **sunny Cornwall**, but the even hotter and sunnier **Mediterranean**.

And whereas we've been looking around **Macedonia and Greece** in the last few weeks, now it's time to cross the Aegean again, over to **Turkey**, and **Ephesus**. It's a city with a history dating back to hundreds of years BC, but after a thousand years or so of sometimes quite astounding grandeur, the site slowly became abandoned. The originally nearby river mouths have silted up as the river delta has slowly proceeded further and further out, three miles into the Aegean. Already, when Paul passed by in AD 60 or so, he chose the nearby seaport of Miletus:

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

(Acts 20:17)

And as Ephesus becomes more and more distant from the sea, it's almost as if it sinks into the ground, too, becoming little more than a village ... until, in the 1800's, excavations began, and some of those amazing **constructions** of two millenia back emerged again. Lots of pictures to flash at you here without much in the way of detail, but let me just mention the **Temple of Artemis** - which will be relevant in our own whistle-stop tour of Ephesus later on this morning.

Although Ephesus as a city disappeared almost without trace, it's actually the New Testament church in Ephesus that we know most about. Anyone like to suggest where it pops us, as we flick through the pages?

Acts / Ephesians / 1/2 Timothy / Revelation

And that means we don't have a whole lot of time to spend on any one of those. But we need to put a bit of time in on where this all started - and very odd it was too, you might have thought when we read those bits from Acts 18 and 19 earlier on.

- An initial flying visit
- A curious legacy
- A longer stay
- A second flying visit
- A letter from Paul to the church

Two letters from Paul to the pastor
A letter from the Lord

- **An initial flying visit (18:19-21)**

At first, you would be excused for thinking nothing much was going to happen in this magnificent city back in the Roman province of Asia, across the sea from Greece. Paul plus companions set sail from Corinth ...

... Paul ... took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

(Acts 18:18)

Soon we find him at Ephesus:

And they came to Ephesus, ...

(Acts 18:19)

And it looks as if the usual pattern kicks in. Paul heads for the nearest synagogue and commences dialogue - interactive, reasoning argument - with the Jews:

... and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

(Acts 18:19)

But then ... nothing, it seems. The "they" here, I guess, are Aquila and Priscilla, though it *could* be the Jews. Probably not a few more interested hearers, whom, I'm imagining, he might have stayed and disciplined further. But no, despite the request, he just moves on.

When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined.

(Acts 18:20)

Folks, two things there. First, learn when to **say No**, learn when to say *Stop*, learn when to move on. We do not have unlimited time or resources, and just because things have been started does not mean they have to be continued as long as we possibly maintain them. There may be better and more important things to move on to.

But, secondly, don't think that we know everything for sure. Stay open to further direction from God, by whatever means. Perhaps a different time will be better - for reasons we don't and can't expect to know, being only human.

But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.

(Acts 18:21)

Yes, it *will* be God's will for Paul to return. But something odd happens first. It looks as if Luke loses focus in his story-telling here, but he hasn't. We first of all need a bit of necessary background, and we needed to see how Aquila and Priscilla were going to be here at Ephesus, but Paul wasn't. He moved on, remember, *taking leave of them ...*

- **A curious legacy (18:24 - 19:7)**

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

(Acts 18:24)

We're given more background than simply "a Jew from Alexandria". He is a man with, we would say, "**the gift of the gab**". Not that he would just talk about *anything* and find a willing audience, but ... well, here's something really worth sharing!

He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, ...

(Acts 18:24-25)

It all looks really very good, doesn't it? Paul has moved on ... but here is his obvious replacement: **competent**, instructed, eloquent, fervent and accurate. And teaching about Jesus. What more could you want? And yet Luke drifts something in at the end which ... is this just a technicality? Is this simply saying why we can only give him **nine out of ten**? Surely, with all this good stuff about him, is this really enough to call the whole show off?

... though he knew only the baptism of John.

(Acts 18:24-25)

It looks as if the remedy is easily applied, though. Though that is quite amazing, if you stop and think. This guy with all these abilities is *also* teachable. He is willing to learn. He does not throw a strop if someone dares to correct him. Oh, I'm sure that they did it carefully - just as Luke records it sympathetically:

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

(Acts 18:26)

Look at the outcome: he becomes useful, recommendable. Aquila and Priscilla's word obviously counts for something!

And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

(Acts 18:27-28)

Before we move onto the second half of this curious interlude, let me just bring you back to that word I used: **teachable**. I don't think this word ever comes up in the Bible itself, but I think it's one of the most important things to look for if you are ever asking someone to take on a significant responsibility in a church. Are they still *teachable* - or do they think they know it all already?

Are they humble enough to know that they still have lots to learn? Not necessarily new doctrine - but greater depth and understanding and wonder and delight in the truth of Jesus Christ? Are we ready to have our current sharp and awkward edges challenged, be rebuked, if need be, be changed and reformed, as we will need to be, if we are to become more like Jesus Christ himself? Folks, are we *teachable*, whether we're 8 or 80? Are you still ready to grow in grace?

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

(Proverbs 9:9)

So ... Apollos goes over to Achaia, and its capital, Corinth ... and then, we find, it was subsequently God's will for Paul to return to Ephesus. It looks as if Aquila and Priscilla must have moved on by now, as they don't get another mention here. But there is some kind of legacy.

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples.

(Acts 19:1)

It looks as if Paul goes for the jugular right away, but I think this is just Luke not recording the small talk. Paul, I'm presuming, feels there is something just a bit odd or deficient about these people. Remember that it's right back at the start of taking the Gospel out into the Roman world. There *weren't* churches everywhere, or stacks of books - not even a New Testament, of course! - so you can't check in or turn to page number 57 and make sure that you really had got it all straight.

But the visiting apostle clearly suspects that there is something wonky here. So he starts to ask a few diagnostic questions. Luke records the one that fits most closely with what he has already written down in the previous chapter.

And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptised?" They said, "Into John's baptism."

(Acts 19:2-3)

So these are sincere followers of Jesus, I think it's fair to say, but their faith is incomplete. They've not yet been told all of what it is to follow Jesus. And my guess is that these are people whom Apollos had spoken to, previously - or else why would

Luke record his presence in Ephesus? it's not key to the story of the whole book. Apollos, before he had himself been more fully instructed, knowing, remember,

... only the baptism of John.

(Acts 18:25)

So Paul now explains, and fills in the gaps in their basic understanding:

And Paul said, "John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus."

(Acts 19:4)

And look, these people are wonderfully teachable, too. They didn't insist that they had got it right, and storm off to form a church of their own. What happens now is much more a case of arrested development finally catching up. Things finally fall into the proper place. They gulp the truth down eagerly. So let's do it *right* this time!

On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Acts 19:5)

And I take what follows as a confirmation from heaven that this is a good and wise and right thing to do. These people are now to be regarded as full believers in Jesus - it's the same argument that Peter used about the inclusion of Gentiles into the church, a few years earlier. If God has sent his Holy Spirit in this unusually demonstrative way into the lives of these people ...

"Can anyone withhold water for baptising these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

(Acts 10:47)

The Gentile new believers in Acts 10 are to be recognised as true followers of Christ. And here in Acts 19, these odd throwback part-believers are now publicly proclaimed as having come through to a full standing in the growing movement of believers in Jesus. Only a small group - but important enough to God to recognise them in this way.

And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

(Acts 19:6-7)

And folks, I don't know whether you'd quite agree with this, but I think that we will from time to time find people, perhaps in churches that we're far from convinced are clear about the Gospel, but people who do simply and quite sincerely believe all the right stuff ... but they have just never realised that there is all the stuff, too, about *personally* receiving Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Nobody had ever told them that there was more to it than just turning up at church and sit / stand / sing when you're supposed to, and come and help out with the soup kitchen or whatever.

But when finally someone speaks that message of the *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ, needful and available to *them*, individually ... such that you would be able to say that ...

... the Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me.

(Galatians 2:20)

Then it is as if the **blossom finally opens**. They know *at last* that this is what they were made for: to ...

... live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

(Galatians 2:20)

Folks, do you know anyone who might be ready to finally hear and respond to that message of *grace* in Jesus? It could be a teenager who has grown up in a Christian home. It could be a life-long churchgoer. That penny can finally drop. And you could perhaps be the one to gently ask that final, incisive question, that finally opens the door for them and lets in the light. Perhaps the question that some of us asked when *Walk Cornwall* took place a few years back: ***Would you be interested in coming to know God personally?***

Anyway, after what has now become quite a long short interlude, Luke moves on to detail Paul now making ...

- **A longer stay (19:8-20:1)**

And *now* it is certainly fruitful and eventful. Paul goes back to his regular pattern.

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

(Acts 19:8)

And the normal backlash kicks in, too.

But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.

(Acts 19:9)

“The disciples” ...? New disciples? Or the ones he had met earlier, the ones we have already been talking about? Or, perhaps, both? Whichever, they now get a very thorough grounding in the faith!

This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

(Acts 19:10)

Though that doesn't quite count as "an event" to me - but there certainly were some! We didn't read on that far earlier, but soon we encounter various unusual things happening during that period of a couple of years. Paul seems to have some very strange powers.

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

(Acts 19:11-12)

Of course, it was *God* doing this, as Luke says. But it looks as if some people think that Paul is just a magician of sorts, conjuring with the right gestures, saying the right words of magic spells. So, instead of **Abradadabra**, they would have been thinking, say "Jesus".

But some **Jewish exorcists** (19:13) try to use the magic "Jesus" word in their trade - goodness knows how that worked! - but it certainly didn't work to use "Jesus" as a magic charm. The whole thing backfires on them, and, as a result,

And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.

(Acts 19:17)

And now something further for the believers. Notice this, *believers* ... but with some unfinished business to sort out.

Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all.

(Acts 19:18-19)

They *had* been what we could call "dabbling in the occult". Now they publicly and irrevocably distance themselves from all of that. They could have kept things quiet. They possibly hadn't realised that it would be better to make this clear break. There are probably a few things nowadays that new believers might be best not just to finish with, but to publicly repudiate, **confessing and divulging**. Freemasonry, perhaps. Illicit relationships or practices. Think Zacchaeus, if you know that story.

Folks, something like that costs, socially or financially.. And that is what can also makes such a move so much of a witness. Look at what happens here:

And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.

(Acts 19:19)

We're talking in the *millions* of pounds there. In today's money. All destroyed, not sold or cashed in. Maybe that's what Paul alludes to in his later letter:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

(Ephesians 5:11)

But look at the result:

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

(Acts 19:20)

Is it fair to suggest, do you think, that if we were to let the word of the Lord increase and prevail mightily *in our own lives*, it might also do the same *in our society*? If charity begins at home, so they say ... does righteousness too?

Back to Ephesus for just one more snippet, though, before we move on. Another riot - characteristically understated by Luke:

About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way.

(Acts 19:23)

And whereas the outrage of the owners of a single liberated Philippian slave girl that caused the previous riot back in Philippi, here is the response of a whole trade that is being sabotaged as people all around start following Jesus ... and stop worshipping Artemis, the local patron deity.

For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth...."

(Acts 19:24-25)

And that's the bottom line, I expect. They can press all the right buttons when relating the legends about Artemis ... and they can be very emotive buttons, too ... but the bottom line is when it hits them in the pocket.

Folks, if the Gospel takes hold in a place, people will change. If enough people change, the locality will change. When revivals hit in previous centuries, pubs went out of business - not that I'm saying that alcohol is evil, but drunkenness decreased. Jail cells usually crammed with lower-level miscreants were no longer needed.

And in any change of that size, somebody will suffer financially. So the Gospel will face opposition from people who follow the writings of Mohammed, or from people who dance to the jingle of money. Or both.

Fortunately for Paul, once again - and fortunately for Ephesus, as it turns out, there is a competent local Roman official who manages to talk the crowd down before they did something stupid.

“If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.”

(Acts 19:38-39)

End of. Move along now. And actually, soon after that, Paul did.

After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

(Acts 20:1)

- **A second flying visit (20:17-38)**

Further down that same chapter, Luke records Paul heading back again towards Jerusalem, and not having time to visit Ephesus. But he still reaches out to them. There are important words to say, for his final in-person visit. So, from the port of Miletus ...

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

(Acts 20:17)

He reminds them of the years of labour he had put in at Ephesus. But even he could not lay a foundation totally impervious to later distortions.

Folks, none of us can. We need to remember that when we sign off our Charitable Incorporated Organisation documents later this year. There is *no* wording of Church Rules that in and of itself will be able to prevent our successors here from going off the rails. We cannot make it watertight. In the end, all we can do is what Paul does at the end of his speech here:

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

(Acts 20:32)

But he gave warnings - which would have made for difficult hearing! Troubles from outside you could sort of expect, but there would be troubles from inside, too.

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, ...”

(Acts 20:29-31)

What becomes of those warnings, as we start to flick quickly onwards?

- **A letter from Paul to the church (Ephesians)**

This is what people think of as one of Paul's "mature" letters, written in later life, with much more time to think, because (as he says twice) ...

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, ...

(Ephesians 4:1)

And the letter is full of amazing, heartening, glorious stuff. He runs his readers through the Gospel again

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved —

(Ephesians 2:4-5)

And he insists that this Gospel must have consequences in their lives and relationships ...

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:1-3)

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(Ephesians 5:18-21)

And he closes with another warning, that there is a battle on.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

(Ephesians 6:10-11)

- **Two letters from Paul to the pastor (1/2 Timothy)**

When his dear friend and colleague Timothy is detailed to provide leadership for the church in Ephesus, he has a specific purpose in mind:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, ...

(1 Timothy 1:3)

I wonder if, when Paul writes “certain persons”, he *had* certain persons in mind, and Timothy, too, would know who they were - or would soon find out. The problem is that those people ...

Certain persons, ... , desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

(1 Timothy 1:6-7)

But maybe it's going to require some very careful handling.

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, ...

(1 Timothy 5:1)

It's certainly going to need patience.

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ...

(2 Timothy 2:24-25)

And did Timothy's ministry in that regard succeed? If 2 Timothy is Paul's last letter, we are looking at something like the mid 60's AD. Flick on another couple of decades, and we find one last mention of Ephesus, in

- **A letter from the Lord** (Revelation 2:1-7)

Paul is long gone. John is the last of the apostles, in exile on a lonely island

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

(Revelation 1:9)

And God sends him there some mighty strange visions, as you might know. But before we come to those visions, seven letters are dictated to seven churches in the province of Asia. Including Ephesus. And we'll finish by reading it in its entirety. It can speak very well for itself, thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit in the people of God.

And it's a solemn warning that we could get our doctrine all straight. So perhaps Timothy did indeed see off those earlier challenges. But other challenges can rise up in their place. A church can love its doctrine, but forget to love its Lord.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

(Revelation 2:1)

“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

(Revelation 2:2-3)

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

(Revelation 2:4)

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

(Revelation 2:5-6)

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

(Revelation 2:7)