

“LEARNING FROM EPHESUS”
Acts 19:8-20; Ephesians 1:15-23; Revelation 2:1-7

Two or three weeks ago, some of you may remember, we had a look at some of the things Paul said about the Holy Spirit which were not really part of his direct teaching, but were clearly in his mind because of the words and phrases he used. This week we’re going to do something a bit similar, something that is usually part of the work of an historian or an archaeologist. We’re going to look at the story of a church from two or three fragments that are scattered around the New Testament. It’s a bit like the kind of thing Dr Carl Chinn does each week in the *Express & Star* as he reconstructs the social history of places in the Black Country by drawing on scattered memories and odd photographs.

The New Testament is made up really of two stories – both interlinked, both totally dependent on each other. In the first four books (the Gospels) we have the story of Jesus – his birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection. The rest of the New Testament is the story of the Church that continued his mission. But it is a big story, the story of the Church (with a capital C) as it spread and grew. It’s not really the story of individual churches, except where they impact on the bigger story. So when it comes to finding out about a particular church in a particular town and how it developed over the sixty or so years covered by the New Testament, we have to piece the story together from the bits of evidence we find scattered through *Acts*, the letters and *Revelation*.

As you’ve probably gathered from the two passages we’ve read this morning (and the title of the sermon on the Notice Sheet – a bit of a give-away!), we’re going to have a quick look at the church in Ephesus and see how the experience of the Christians there might have something to say to us today. In many ways it was a totally different situation from today and you may think that any lessons learned from it must be fairly contrived. After all, it was in a different culture from ours – although one that was very heavily influenced by other gods, both pagan and pragmatic (Diana and money). It was in a different geographical situation and existed many centuries ago – although men and women have certain ways of behaving and certain attitudes that seem to be common to all places and all times. And it was one the very first churches to be founded, so had not had the centuries of theological and sociological background that we do today – although there are particular problems and joys that seem to be part of the life of a church however well-established it might be.

In *Acts 19*, Luke tells us of the early days of the Ephesians church. This was in about AD55, during Paul’s third missionary journey around the Mediterranean. Like so many of the first churches to grow up around the Mediterranean rim at that time, it grew out of the local Jewish synagogue. In fact, it came out of the synagogue about three months after Paul first started preaching there, and he was forced to go into a public lecture hall to hold daily discussions for two years. But that persistence paid off, and the church was established and began to grow in what was a very cosmopolitan, pagan, inhospitable city.

Luke recounts that there were miracles which took place there as the Holy Spirit did his work in the lives of those who responded to Paul’s preaching of the gospel. The church started to get a name for itself in the community and stood up to the vested interests of the local power brokers, but no-one was in any doubt what lay behind it – as Luke writes, “*the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour.*” Many people repented openly of their sin and the power of the occult received a considerable blow. In the next chapter, we read of Paul’s farewell to the elders of the Ephesian church, so the church must have become fairly well established for Paul to feel able to leave in the hands of these new leaders. It was great start. This was going to be a great church – respected, influential, active, growing.

We discover our next set of clues as to the unfolding story of this Ephesian church in the letter Paul wrote to them about five years later. Paul’s *Letter To The Ephesians* deals with certain specific issues which they obviously needed to sort out, but the overall impression we get is of a church that is still thriving, that is still at work giving people glimpses of what the Kingdom of God is like. In the first chapter (*1:15-23*), which was the second passage we read this morning, Paul writes one of his customary

commendations of the church, praising their love and their faith. They are people who are doing pretty well in the worshipping and witnessing departments and Paul gives thanks for them on a regular basis. Clearly, given the difficulties inherent in maintaining a witness for Christ in a city full of idol worshippers, money-minded trade guilds, and traders and sailors from all over the known world, the Ephesian church is doing the business.

Indeed, over thirty years later, in a passage we haven't yet read, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, speaking through John, continues to commend them for their "*hard work, perseverance*", endurance and general all-round tirelessness and activity. What a great church! What a committed bunch of believers! And probably, while we've been talking about the church in Ephesus, some of you have been drawing parallels in your own mind between them and the church in Wade Street. Of course you have – that's the point of reading the stories of the New Testament: to see how we measure up to the examples we've been given.

And the answer is probably: pretty well. Our situation may be quite different (as we've already remarked), but let's give credit where it's due. We are a church that is growing (albeit fairly slowly). We try to ensure that the gospel of Jesus Christ is faithfully proclaimed. We work pretty hard at getting all the churchy bits right – new buildings, new initiatives, new opportunities for outreach, whilst sticking to the core beliefs that have been at the heart of the Christian community since the days of the Ephesians. We have a certain amount of influence in our local community and in the denominations of which we are a part. We have a good reputation both in the corridors of power in our city and in the wider situations. (People in the URC and in the Baptist Association speak very highly of what they hear about Wade Street.) Why not pat ourselves on the back and take a metaphorical bow – especially after the endeavours of the past two or three years, and with the vision we have for the next few years? I reckon Jesus Christ might say of us, as he did of the church in Ephesus in about AD95, "*I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance ... You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary.*"

But let me read you the whole of that short letter to the Ephesians, so you get the full flavour of Jesus' remarks – because there is a sting in the tail, and I reckon there might be a bit of that here, too.

(Read *Revelation 2:1-7*.)

A great church. An influential church. A hard working church. But they've forgotten **why** they're doing it all. They have "*forsaken their first love*". There's plenty of activity, they've been beavering away for thirty-odd years doing all the right thing, but there's no longer any real rationale to it all, no sense of what it's really all about. We've got loads of stuff going on here at Wade Street Church: house groups and prayer groups, activities for this and that, a great new set of buildings, lots of people who think we're doing a wonderful work. But can we remember **why** we're doing it all? Do you know **why** you are involved? Do you still have that first love – not for the church, not even for your fellow church-goers, but for Jesus himself? Do you still have a passion for Jesus?

Just pause for a few moments and think back over your time as a believer. Are you still on fire for Jesus? Is there still that burning desire to know him better, to have more of his Holy Spirit within you, to live each day more and more as he wants you to because you care about him and love him so much? Or is there a kind of dryness about your Christian life now, a sense that Jesus is a long way off? Had you even noticed? I'm a little bit anxious that we might be moving in that direction as a church. Have we got to the stage where we think of ourselves as a church that does great things in the community, rather than a church that does great things for Jesus?

Now I may have got that quite wrong. I remember preaching through these letters to the seven churches in *Revelation* over ten years ago and saying some similar things, and one or two people here were quite affronted that I should entertain such thoughts. If I have got it wrong – sorry: look on these words as a warning to make sure we don't go down that path, rather than as a suggestion of what's already

happening. But if I'm right, then we need to take a good look at ourselves and heed what Jesus has to say here. Have we forsaken our first love? Can we remember why we're doing all these things here? Are we still focussed on Jesus and on him alone rather than on our own grandiose plans or our own petty personal hobby-horses? Jesus' words here have something very important to say to us, I believe – some good advice for trying to get back that sense of mission, purpose and passion that should really characterise our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. And it's all to be found in v5 of this short letter.

1. **REMEMBER**

Remember – think back, take stock. I wonder how often we pause to consider our walk with Jesus, how often we stop and think about where we are. Many of you will be involved on a daily basis with gathering data, assessing progress, measuring achievement and productivity in your office, factory or other place of work. In some situations you need to know precisely what progress is being made at every minute of the day – how many children are working at their target grade? how many policies have been sold today? what's the share price in Tokyo at this very moment? how much bacteria is there in my chocolate? You can see where you've come from and you have a good idea of where you're going.

What about your Christian experience? Now I'm not wanting to suggest for one moment that we should be burdening ourselves with targets to do with how many chapters of the Bible we read each day, how long we spend in prayer, how much we put in the offering and so on. But do you ever consider whether you are making any headway in becoming more like Jesus.

Look back – if you can remember – to the time when you first responded to the call of Jesus Christ. Can you remember the joy and enthusiasm you experienced then? Can you recall the intensity with which you wanted to love Jesus – and to be loved by him? Can you remember the desire you had to share what had happened with other people? Your experience of responding to Jesus may not have been dramatic, nor even particularly sudden, but I reckon most of us could look back to a time when we were more eager to love Jesus than perhaps we are today.

Remember how good it was and compare that with now. You may be someone who is involved with the life of the church – here or elsewhere, a local church or a broader Christian organisation – and the activity, the routine, the pressures and expectations of others have begun to take their toll. No longer is it a pleasure to serve Christ. No longer is it a joy to be with his people. No longer is there that eager anticipation that God is going to do something special. That's all been overshadowed by the desperate need to keep the ball rolling, to ensure that this happens and that happens, that these people are satisfied and those people are kept happy. It's not the joy of loving Christ that is now the driving force, but the awful fear that someone will notice that you're not there when you should be, or that you've missed your turn on the rota, or that you forget to do something that is expected of you.

Think back. Remember. Remember the closeness that you felt. As the hymn writer put it, "*Where is that blessedness I knew when first I found the Lord?*" For many of us, I suspect, it's a distant memory.

2. **REPENT**

Now that's not a word we like at all these days. It suggests that we might be in the wrong, that we might in some way be responsible for what's happening. And in a culture of passing blame on to someone else, of trying to shift the onus on to others, of rights rather than responsibilities, it all seems a bit old-fashioned. But that's what Jesus says here. Repent! Turn around. Make a new start – *another* new start for many of us.

The first step on the road to repentance is to **acknowledge** that things are not right. That's really what we've just been talking about. Don't keep sliding down that slippery slope away from a real passion for

Jesus because you don't want anyone else to know that things aren't quite right. Or because you feel that if you take time out to get things sorted out things will grind to a halt. I worked with a colleague who was an alcoholic. We could all see what was happening to him, but he was unable to do anything about it. Then one morning he knocked on my classroom door as I was taking the register and said he wanted a word with me out in the corridor. He looked me in the eye and said "I'm an alcoholic", and from that day his life turned around and he is now one of the most successful head teachers in London. Another person I worked with in Christian ministry was having an affair but constantly denied he was doing anything wrong – until he was caught red-handed and had no alternative but to acknowledge what was going on. From then on his life turned around.

The second step is to **ask** for God's forgiveness. Tell him in prayer that you are sorry things have got as they are. Realise that he is the only one who can really help you move forward and tell him that in prayer. God doesn't hold grudges. He's not resentful. He has promised to enable you to make a new start. His love is infinitely more gracious and forgiving than yours could ever be, so receive that love and allow God to remake you, to renew your love for him, to relight the fire of passion that once burned so brightly.

And then **ask** some more. Ask not just for forgiveness, for dealing with the sins of the past and the slow, stifling mediocrity of the present, but for the help of the Holy Spirit for progress in the future. Ask God to surround you, fill you, shower you (whatever image you want to use) with his Holy Spirit. Ask that he will move within your life to set you free from your slavery to the expectations of others, the agendas which are yours not his, the activism that prevents you from communicating with him as he wants you to. God's longing to do that. There's a deep desire within the heart of Jesus for his people to rediscover their first love – not for his benefit, but for yours. But he will not force that on you: he patiently waits for you to reach out and ask him.

3. **REKINDLE**

Jesus tells the Ephesians that they are to "*do the things they did at first.*" Having reflected on what it used to be like and repented of the fact that things have slipped and their passion is no longer there, he says they are to get back to what it was like. To be, once again, enthusiastic, passionate, eager. Now this isn't some kind of pointless spiritual nostalgia. He's not saying to us get the pews back, get the membership back down to 45, start wearing hats again, use the hymn book – all that kind of twaddle that people often come out with when they sense things are changing and they don't like it. It's not about a checklist of actions and activities – that's what caused the problem in the first place. It's about attitudes, about openness. It's about that word we've used several times already this morning – **passion**.

As I just said, you can't just sit around and wait for it to happen. You do need to do something – and we've already said that we need to pray, to ask God for his help. And you may need to do other things too. It may be reading the Bible so that God can speak to you through its pages: reading the Bible with an expectation that God will speak rather than with a sense of duty that you've got to keep up with the stuff in the Daily Notes. It may mean praying – praying in a way that is a conversation with God rather than a shopping lists of wants and desires, or self congratulatory praise. It may mean that you need to spend a bit more time with Jesus – time set aside just to think about him, to reflect on him and his love, to talk with him. Remember that story in *Luke 10:38-42* in which Martha gets all upset that Mary's not helping her get tea ready because she's listening to Jesus? Most churches have far too many Marthas and far too few Marys: people who want all the work done, but can't remember why.

In a sense all of that is kindling for the fire. But you still need the spark to get it going, the spark of the Holy Spirit. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday – about wanting that Spirit of hope and holiness and love and power in our lives. Several people afterwards said that we could do with that – not in any critical way. Let's get back to **why** we're doing this: we're doing it for Jesus! We're not doing it for the glory of the church. We're not doing it for our own gratification. We're not

doing it to draw attention to ourselves. We're not doing it as a form of therapy. We're not even doing it for each other. We're doing it because Jesus loves us and we love him.

Maybe this morning there are some people who feel that they do need to rediscover their love for Jesus, those of you who can remember what it used to be like and recognise that it's not really like that any more. Maybe you feel the need to repent of all that, to ask for God's forgiveness that he has been edged out of your life by all the things you're doing for him. Maybe you want to rekindle that passion for Jesus that will revitalise your life, your worship, your witness.

Well, let's do it, then. Let's now pray together for God to touch our lives, for our love for Jesus to return in power and intensity, for his Holy Spirit to move us forward so that our lives shine for God. And to show that we're serious about this, if you want to do that, then come and stand out at the front here. We don't often do that – but it will be a way of demonstrating your response, your commitment. *“You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”*

(Discussion notes on next page)

"LEARNING FROM EPHESUS"
Acts 19:8-20; Ephesians 1:15-23; Revelation 2:1-7

In *Acts 19*, Luke tells us of the early days of the Ephesian church and recounts that there were miracles which took place there. The church started to get a name for itself in the community and Luke writes, "*the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour.*" Many people repented openly of their sin and the power of the occult received a considerable blow. This was a great church – respected, influential, active, growing.

Paul's *Letter To The Ephesians* deals with certain specific issues which they obviously needed to sort out, but the overall impression we get is of a church that is still thriving, that is still at work giving people glimpses of what the Kingdom of God is like. In the first chapter (*1:15-23*), Paul writes one of his customary commendations of the church, praising their love and their faith.

Over thirty years later, Jesus, speaking through John in *Revelation 2:1-7*, continues to commend them for their "*hard work, perseverance*", endurance and general all-round tirelessness and activity.

A great church. An influential church. A hard working church. But they've forgotten **why** they're doing it all. They have "*forsaken their first love*". There's plenty of activity, but there's no longer any real rationale to it all, no sense of what it's really all about. Can **we** remember **why** we're doing it all? Do you still have that first love for Jesus himself? Do you still have a passion for Jesus? Have we got to the stage where we think of ourselves as a church that does great things in the community, rather than a church that does great things for Jesus?

1. REMEMBER

Look back to the time when you first responded to the call of Jesus Christ. Can you remember the joy and enthusiasm you experienced then? Can you recall the intensity with which you wanted to love Jesus – and to be loved by him? Can you remember the desire you had to share what had happened with other people? Remember how good it was and compare that with now.

2. REPENT

The first step on the road to repentance is to **acknowledge** that things are not right. The second step is to **ask for God's forgiveness**. Thirdly, **ask God to fill you with his Holy Spirit**.

3. REKINDLE

Jesus tells the Ephesians that they are to "*do the things they did at first.*" We need to pray, to ask God for his help. And you may need to do other things too.

Questions for discussion

1. What are the good things that might be said about our church?
2. Do you feel that you are less passionate about Jesus now than you were when you first became a Christian? What are the things that cause us to lose our passion for Jesus?
3. Why is it that so many Christians seem so intent on activism? Look at *Luke 10:38-42*. What can we learn from this story?
4. Are we more eager to talk about what the Bible says than actually do it? Why/why not?
5. In *Revelation 2:5*, Jesus threatens to "*remove their lampstand*". What do you think that means? What might it mean today?
6. What are you going to do in response to these words of Jesus?