

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Notes (2) Acts of the Apostles

Sunday August 3rd: Acts 18 and 19: Host Miranda, Lead Toyin *Husband and Wife Team – sometimes with Priscilla mentioned before Aquilla. Rabbis were expected to practice a trade: this meant they didn't sell their sermons, AND stayed in touch with all the other wage earners. So (goat skin) tent and leather making for Paul and his two colleagues,..Paul focus on important towns – not villages. Paul can get irritated with Jewish opposition; but he doesn't give up on either synagogues or Jews, and has notable successes, e.g. synagogue leaders. Much travel, but 2 or 3 years in some strategic places. Governor Gallio was brother of Seneca, and a kind and impartial man – though impatient with what he saw as inter-Jewish squabbles. Fringe Jewish wonder workers try to cash in on new “Jewish” sect's miracle working. Interesting to find “Christian” missionaries who haven't got beyond the John the Baptist baptism of repentance to the Holy Spirit Jesus salvation stage of belief. “Curiosity about Paul develops into reverence for the Master Jesus”.*

Artemis is Diana, and silversmiths did make a fortune from silver Diana statues. Independent Roman writers confirm Christianity was hitting the tourist trade of major pagan temples. Note the ability of some Empire officials to talk sense into mobs; as well as the fickleness of violent mobs: “Most of them had no idea what was going on, or why they were there”. Christian threat to vested interests. Hair cuts and vows: Some Jews took Thank You vows which included no hair-cut and no meat and wine for a period - followed by a ceremonial haircut and the hair being burned.

The Temple of Artemis was one of the 7 Wonders: 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, 60 feet high, with 120 magnificent pillars. 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. preaching sessions fitted in with the tradition in hot countries of normal working hours being before 11 a.m. and after 4 p.m. Tent-making in an open-fronted shop added to preaching opportunities. Note that a woman preaching does not seem to have shocked everybody: c.f, John Knox's objections centuries later.

Sunday August 10th: Acts 20 and 21: Host Andy, Lead Evan

Making sure someone is ready to take over. [What makes a good pastor/leader?] Paul has new companions. [A grumpy old man could not have attracted such loyal friends!] Note Sunday Evening Worship (at end of working day): commonly Love Feast followed by Lord's Supper. Midnight sermon, and someone nods off by open window. Travel by sea and by land: [Paul probably avoiding lynching on pilgrim ship.] Jews and Greeks equal. Constant warnings to Paul. “What matters to me is to finish what God started.” “Stay awake!!” “They knew that they would never see him again.” “Give God the glory!” Sponsoring and sharing in a purification, which included 7 days in Temple and cost a great deal in sacrificial supplies, was common for those who could afford it. [A hugely risky thing for Paul at a peak Temple attendance time.] Note Paul's enemies include non-Christian Jews AND Christian Jews very angry that Paul was (believed to be) encouraging Jewish Christians to give up “essential” Jewish practices.

Hard for us to understand; but think of the Jewish identity fought for over centuries being threatened by a renegade Jew. Paul the PASTOR, not just preacher. Interesting to encounter Philip again – this time with four Christian Prophet daughters. These chapters ask us to consider how we reconcile

inevitability and choice. An Egyptian Jewish radical preacher had recently raised a mob in Jerusalem, and escaped the authorities. The Young Roman in charge of the Antonine Tower that overlooked the Temple thought Paul was that Egyptian back again to cause trouble. Note again the Romans determined to ensure justice rather than mob rule. The death penalty for Gentiles entering the inner Temple was written up in the Temple. 15 years after the Temple doors were slammed on Paul for the last time, the Temple was destroyed for ever.

Paul is thought to have written his Letter to the Romans while at Corinth on the travels recorded in these two chapters. Jesus saying "It is more blessed to give than to receive" is not recorded in the Gospels, but only in Acts 20.

Was Paul being suicidal or just fulfilling his mission? How do we agree both with Paul's Spirit-inspired journey, and with the Christians inspired by the Spirit to try to stop him?

Fast spreading rumours with fatal effect not limited to today's social media outlets!

Sunday August 17th: Acts 22, 23 and 24: Host David, Lead Peta

Paul's account of his own history. Declaring himself good Jew and good Christian; and Roman citizen by birth. He knew perfectly well that Ananias was High Priest...and that he was a disgrace to his calling. He knew that Felix, the ex-slave, was also a scoundrel...as he extolled his virtues. The High Priest has Paul's face slapped, despite the Jewish law saying "He who strikes the cheek of an Israelite, strikes the glory of God". Note Pharisees versus Sadducees: the High Council was a very divided body, with two factions disagreeing politically and on what are fairly crucial doctrinal issues.

You see Rome at its best and worst, including something like a small Roman army being dedicated to keeping Paul safe once it was known that the man they were about to torture the truth out of was a Roman citizen. (And no doubt had tucked away somewhere the badge to prove it.) Paul believes Christianity is fulfilling the Jewish faith. His enemies saw him as destroying it. Paul emphasised God's freely given grace. His Jewish critics saw God's grace as something to be earned by keeping the rules. The downside of Felix and the Roman law is that Paul is effectively locked up and forgotten about for two years – which must have been endlessly frustrated for the eager missionary.

Perhaps what we should admire most in Paul is his extraordinary ability to maintain his motivation where others would have despaired. No doubt he always had in mind that the greatest preacher and healer and carer in human history had encountered endless opposition and been tortured to death at the age of 33. One word to sum up Paul?

Sunday August 24th: Acts 25-28: Host Andy, Lead Brian:

At the renewed trial, everyone knows that Paul would be lynched by the mob if there were to be another Jerusalem trial... though whether the 40 who has sworn two years earlier not to eat or drink until Paul had been killed were still alive.....! The level of sustained resentment against Paul is quite extraordinary. The last bit of Chapter 25 is magnificent common sense; and you can sense the

irritation with the accusers. (A bit like the Roman listening to the Aramaic argument between Paul and his accusers, and understanding not a word of it.) Treasure Paul's "I can't for the life of me see why it is a criminal offence to believe that God raises the dead." Treasure also King Agrippa's wry comment that, much more of this, and Paul would convert him to Christianity.

A difficult sea journey, with many hazards ... and the strong likelihood of the non-sailors being seriously sea-sick; but you sense Paul (and God) being firmly in charge.. Generous hospitality from Publius; and Paul's healing ministry is renewed. Note yet again Christian friends encountered en route; and huge trust in Paul not trying to escape. Paul the prisoner remains very firmly Paul the Apostle. The trial seems incredibly long delayed...or would do if we didn't know the state of our own legal system... and our prison system would not allow the flexibility that Paul enjoyed. Little is said about this; but if Paul could not be earning his living as a tent-maker in Rome, he was being funded by the Church. Here again we have individual ministry in the context of community ministry.

We do not know the outcome beyond Luke's story. Possibly the trial never took place. Possibly it did, and Paul was acquitted. He died in the Nero killings. If we could ask Luke or Paul "What now"; they might well say "That's up to you!" The challenge of Christianity is the odd combination of God is in charge" with "You are responsible". We don't feel up to the task, but the unmarried Paul, changing tack from persecutor to persecuted, not in the best of health, and maybe with a stammer, can't have seen himself as the ideal choice for Chief Jesus Messenger. "For Paul..... and us?....everyday was Easter Day.