

Sunday 3rd May 2009 Christ Church 6.30 pm
Opposition from Ephesus – Acts 19:23-41 (Mark 12:28-34)

So you've pressed the red button and you're here this evening where we are looking at our sermon series on Ephesians in a bit more detail. Before we hear about the riot in Ephesus, let us set the scene by remembering what Graham was telling us last week.

We were looking at the early church in Ephesus, where some people were having an inadequate Christian experience and just like us today needed to repent, believe and recognise the holy spirit in their lives. We saw that genuine Christian discipleship is to be rooted in a passion for God's word. And we need to make sure we are not trying to use Jesus to sanctify our old way of life, but that we are truly all for him.

We have seen at the very start of Paul's time in Ephesus and in this part of Acts, Paul preaching the gospel, which in turn changes people's lives and has an impact on the whole society. As well as continuing his calling to preach, Paul also has some defending to do, so with that in mind, let us listen to God's word which Mike will read for us now.

Thank you Mike. Let us focus on those first few verses from our reading. Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver trinkets of the goddess Artemis, and I love this bit, *brought in no little business for the craftsmen*. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our *trade* will lose its good name, but also that the *temple of the great goddess Artemis* will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.

Clearly Paul has chosen quite a challenge in coming to Ephesus. This goddess, Artemis is supposed to be a symbol of fertility with thousands of people coming to worship this man made god from all over the world. Indeed the temple in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world, so Paul is preaching in probably one of the worst places he could find. And whilst people are visiting Ephesus making their pilgrimage, of course they want a souvenir of their visit – maybe a silver trinket to take away so they can carry on worshipping at home.

This all reminds me of a typical theme park ride at Walt Disney World over in Florida. You queue for the ride, go into a pre-show, then the ride and exit into a shop! Where, yes you can buy a souvenir – something to remember your experience. The same formula is used time and again – an attraction followed by a souvenir opportunity. Take a visit to the supermarket – you've finished shopping, but by the till just as you are waiting to pay there are plenty of tempting things still to buy!

But back to Ephesus, and the silver trinkets of Artemis. In verse 26 we read that one of Paul's topics for preaching is, that man made gods are no gods at all. As we would expect when the holy spirit is at work, there are consequences of his preaching for some of the people within Ephesus and Demetrius becomes their spokesperson, after all, he is the one making a considerable profit from the sale of souvenirs. Cleverly he does not dwell on his lack of a steady wage, he focuses on the good name of his trade and that their goddess Artemis will be discredited and robbed of her divine majesty. Demetrius clearly dupes the crowd into turning his falling on to hard times into a belief that these new Christians are attacking their goddess and their religion.

You can imagine it happening – Paul has been preaching the gospel, a new way of life, telling people to reject everything they currently believe in and not just go back to an old way of life, but a completely new and radical idea – Christianity. Putting Jesus as king in their lives.

There is bound to be trouble brewing. When something new comes along what is the natural human response? Distrust, rebellion, a reluctance to change and accept something new and different. When somebody tells you to live a Jesus centred life and turn away from your old life there is bound to be conflict.

So Demetrius was doing very well thank you very much, and along comes Paul to change his livelihood, change his income and he becomes the instigator of the riot we heard about.

The crowd behaves in a typical fashion. Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. And as we heard, the crowd's response to Alexander, the spokesperson for the Jews, is to shout in unison for two hours "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

So what can you shout for two hours? What happens to you if you repeat the same phrase for two hours? Try it sometime, or maybe don't! I couldn't even manage a minute before realising that that I would soon have no voice left, which might have been good news for you tonight! But also I would be completely hoarse, and it is also brain numbingly boring!

So the crowd continue with two hours of shouting in direct response to Paul's teaching of Jesus as king. And that is exactly what we should see whenever the gospel is preached effectively – it should create an impact in people's lives.

If the crowd do not want to live Jesus centred lives, what is the only thing they can do? What has Demetrius achieved? If Artemis was truly a goddess with power, then where is the action? Indeed who today worships the goddess Artemis? All the crowd has done is to shout themselves hoarse.

We see exactly the same today. Earlier this year Richard Dawkins launched a number of posters which had been applied to side of buses. The sign read "There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Such anti-Christian views seem to be more and more prevalent in our society. The ironic thing about this particular poster is that having faith in Jesus actually leads you to stop worrying and life as a Christian can be very enjoyable. But of course that would mean that people like Richard Dawkins and the British Humanist Association would have to actually stop and listen to what Christians are saying. If they didn't chant for two hours, they might actually start to understand what Christianity is all about.

Anyway back to our crowd in Ephesus. Finally it is the city clerk who has the skill in crowd control to end the riot making four points:

He reminds the crowd that everyone in the world knows the Ephesus is the guardian of Artemis' temple and image. Secondly, that Paul's travelling companions are not actually guilty of anything – they've neither robbed, nor blasphemed about the goddess. Thirdly he points out that Demetrius does know the proper legal procedures to bring their grievance before the courts in Ephesus. And fourthly the citizens of Ephesus are in danger of being charged with civil disorder by Rome. So the crowd disperses and the riot is over.

In the riot we see five things happening and I wonder if you can spot the similarities with life in our country today?

The cause of the riot was fuelled by economics – remember "no little business for the craftsmen"

Their lives were based on tradition, they were rebelling against Paul's new teaching – "the temple of the goddess Artemis will be discredited"

The basis of their society thrived on fear – remember how some of the Jews pushed Alexander to the front.

Their core values are there for all to see with racism being somewhere near the top – in verse 34 – when they realised he was Jew, they shouted for two hours!
And lastly they were ignorant – most of the people did not know why they were there.

The economy more important than Jesus?
Lives based on tradition?
A society thriving on fear?
Racism?
Ignorance?

We see them all too frequently today.

But why did Luke write about this event? What is it that Luke is telling us with this description of the riot?

He actually wrote this down to show how Christians should defend the gospel. At that time he wanted to show Rome had no case against Christianity or indeed against Paul. No crime had actually been committed, these early Christians were innocent and so had nothing to fear from the legal process of that time.

In the face of a completely new religion, following Jesus, a new way of life, a riot had been turned into a setting free of the gospel message to continue to spread out to all nations. Before we look at how the experience of Paul at Ephesus and this riot affects and challenges us, let us listen to God's word again as Carol brings us our gospel reading.

Thank you Carol. So we've pressed the red button and we want to know how do the riot in Ephesus and the message of Jesus to love the Lord your God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength affect our lives today?

There are three ways in which our lives should be affected. Preaching and defending the gospel should challenge us and those around us. One of our responses should be to trust God with every part of our lives. And we should also see that we are now free to tell others about Jesus.

So firstly, preaching and defending the gospel. In our actions and in our words we need to take our role in church seriously. With other Christians we read God's word, we pray and we grow in our knowledge of what it means to have Jesus at the centre of our lives. To non-Christians, we need to be seen in exactly the same way. It is no good being a Christian on Sunday, and living a different life for the rest of the week. There should be no difference between what we do now and what Paul did in his Christian ministry. It really is a simple choice, chant for two hours "I reject Jesus as Lord" or accept the challenge, which hopefully won't lead to a riot, but should lead to people wanting to find out more about Jesus and what he can do for them.

Our second response should be to trust God. In our reading from Acts, despite Paul wanting to appear before the crowd, he was persuaded to do nothing. In fact our reading is all about people's reactions to Paul's earlier preaching rather than anything that Paul does at the riot. Loving the Lord with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength does not mean we can single-handedly carry out God's work on our own. Just as Paul had friendship and the advice of some administrators in Ephesus, we will also need friends both in church and outside of the church. Trusting God and others with our lives is one of the biggest challenges we face in the world today, but we should also remember that it was no different for Paul.

And finally we are free to tell others about Jesus. Unless you've been living elsewhere recently you will know that 21st century Britain is not particularly sympathetic towards Christians. In a so-called age of tolerance and respect for others, Christians are still persecuted, and left to feel as a minority within society. And indeed if we look at Moreton we are very much a minority within our community. But if you know Jesus, if you know how to

point others to where they can hear, read and see God, then you are following the example set by Paul in Ephesus. You never know, you may even cause a riot! Because Paul and his disciples had committed no crime, the gospel message was set free to spread further and even throughout the whole world.

Taking our role seriously within church, trusting God and others with our lives and being set free to spread our gospel message should be our key goals as we live our lives this week. And as we continue to look in more detail at Paul's time in Ephesus we will see more about what God has done for us and how to live in response to that.