

The wild-beast show
Bible reading: Acts 19.21-41

And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you — a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die". 1 Corinthians 15.30-32.

Paul's active career as a missionary is drawing to a close — but he doesn't know that yet. He and his colleagues are just aware of a sense of restlessness — Paul's getting itchy feet. He's been in Ephesus two whole years (v.10), with a solid teaching ministry teaching out into the whole of the province of Asia. It was a good place for a teaching base, with trade-routes from Syria, India and China funnelling down from the Anatolian plateau towards the great harbour of Ephesus, opening out towards the western Mediterranean. Daughter-churches have been planted along the valleys, like the churches at Colossae and Laodicea (Luke doesn't mention them, but this is when they must have been founded.) Paul too has a yearning to head out west — a feeling that he's destined to see Rome before he's done (v.21). What he doesn't know is that he will arrive in Rome not as a successful missionary — but as a prisoner.

First, though, there are loose ends to be tied up. Paul wants to revisit the churches he founded in Greece and Macedonia — especially Corinth, which is causing him a great deal of heartache. He's planning a major financial aid project for the church in Jerusalem (see 1 Corinthians 16.1-8 and 2 Corinthians 8—9), so he needs to go back to Jerusalem before heading out west (v.21). But Ephesus has one more surprise in store.

As we saw in Corinth, migrant traders and their religions had a recognised place in the life of these big commercial cities — but it was always precarious. Ephesus was the centre of one of the oldest cults in Asia Minor, the site of the great Temple of Artemis (or Diana) of the Ephesians, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The pictures above show a reconstruction of the great temple (bigger than the Acropolis in Athens!) and a coin showing the famous image of the many-breasted goddess of fertility. Ephesus was also a great centre of the silver trade, and archaeologists have found examples of the miniature silver mini-shrines (designed as pilgrim souvenirs) that Luke describes (v.24). They've also found evidence of the trade-guilds, of the type that brought about the riot that finally closed down Paul's Ephesus ministry.

What causes a normally peaceful city to erupt into a riot? The motivations Luke's story brings out are complex — and surprisingly modern: religious fervour mixed with national pride, commercial interests feeling threatened — and fears about losing a livelihood (vv.25-27). The great theatre (see yesterday's picture) must have been a terrifying spectacle, taken over by an impromptu crowd chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (vv.28, 34) — a mixture of a football crowd and a political

rally. But it's hard not to feel that the latent motivation behind the chants was a form of racism — fear of foreigners, fear of the other (vv.33-34). Luke paints a shrewd portrait of the magistrates, too — desperate to defuse a dangerous situation and disperse the crowds before it gets to the ears of the Roman proconsul (vv.35-40).

Was this the occasion that made Paul feel he had “fought with wild beasts at Ephesus” (1 Cor 15.31)? We don't know — but whatever the motivations of the mob, Paul was on the wrong end of it. He knew what it felt like to be a wild-beast show — an object of contempt, the butt of the crowd. As a young Jew, growing up in Tarsus, he'd probably experienced racism most of his life. This is one of the things he comes back to time and again in his letters, that Jesus defuses the divisions of race, gender and class and restores the human race to its original wholeness: “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew and Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.27-8). In Jesus, *every* life matters.

God bless, Loveday.