

Sunday 2nd May 2021, 10.30 am, Park Road BC, Zoom, Acts 19:21 – 20:1

The history of churches is often recorded as the history of the ministers who come and go. My last Sunday service as Moderator at PRBC. It will be 4 and a half years by the time I hand over to Derek in July!! Passage for this anniversary morning is about a minister (Paul) leaving the church in Ephesus. And they ended up in a fight! Hopefully we won't fight or to grieve, as I end my time with you at the end of June, Derek will come as the next minister in July. The church in Ephesus survived their transition nicely, and I'm sure we will too!

PRBC has experienced many transitions The first Baptists (1653) would have met in homes. From 1740 to 1785 Mr Moyses was the pastor, followed by Mr Poole. By 1794 there were only 2 Members left! Three years later Samuel Wright from Spalding was minister and the church grew. In 1801, with 18 members, there was a split but it was healed. Mr Wright was pastor for 48 years. With ups and downs and highs and lows, the church built a new chapel in Westgate (where the Bull Hotel is now) in 1852. A year later Thomas Barrass became minister of the church of 30 members in a building that sat 250! Married to a Whittlesey lady he oversaw the growth of the church and a new building in Queen Street seating 800!! By 1899 the Membership was 693. He died in February 1901, shortly after retiring. In 1905 the church at Queen Street was destroyed by fire. The corner of Park Road and Geneva Street was selected as the new site for the new church. Another connection with Whittlesey was in the person of Arthur Itter, he wasn't a minister, he was a church secretary and deacon who worked in the brickworks in Kings Dyke/Whittlesey. He became mayor elect in 1933, the youngest to ever hold the office and sadly died less than 2 months after becoming mayor in 1934. Arnold, Streuli, Gorge Bebb, Keith Tucker, William Lush, all post war ministers. In 1952 George Hooper came with his wife Florence and was minister here for 26 years. He married Ernie Wise to his wife Doreen here. He saw Pat Woolhouse go to mission service in Congo. Florence House is named after his wife, Eric's mum. And that's not to mention more recent ministers like George Balmer and the 2 Timothys!

Acts 19:21, begins with the words "after all this had happened" so what happened?

Acts 19: 1 – 16 Paul was on his travels, he'd found a passionate preacher, Apollos, who had only experienced the baptism of John. Paul asked Priscilla and Aquilla, to take Apollos under their wing, steer him in the right direction and built him up in his ministry. This is always the mark of a good leader, they will find, resource and release the ministries of others according to the Scriptures. How many of us have found ourselves doing things we'd never have imagined! Apollos preached about Jesus, seeing fruit for the Kingdom as people came to faith in Christ.

When Apollos was in Corinth, Paul went through Ephesus and stopped! He'd found some disciples of Jesus. They too had only received the baptism of John. They told Paul, "We did not even know that there was a Holy Spirit". So, Paul baptised them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, laid hands on them, prayed and they received the Holy Spirit. He stayed in the synagogue in Ephesus for about three months, teaching this little group of disciples more of Jesus. Others came to faith, but some then began to malign the ministry of Paul among them. Paul took his little group of believers to a lecture room where he began to teach, daily, for two years. The result was (Acts 19: 10) that all the Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. They saw signs and wonders, visible demonstrations of the truth they were proclaiming.

Then we find some self-appointed leaders driving out demons in the name of Jesus and in the name of Paul. Seven sons of one Jewish priest were doing this when an evil spirit said to them “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” and then the demon gave them a good hiding! The word about this fight got about and the people in the region were seized with a healthy fear of the Lord and the name of Jesus was held in high honour! Believers who might have kept their faith quiet came out with it, others confessed their sins and many brought their expensive magic scrolls out and burnt them publically. What a “high” they must have been on. Two years and three months after Paul arrived in the city of Ephesus and it must have felt as if the whole city was coming after Jesus.

Acts 19: 21 – 22 While they were praising God and rejoicing, Paul announces that he is leaving. No! Most of them were Christians because of Paul, he’d preached the Gospel to them, led them to faith, he’d probably baptised them. They couldn’t imagine church without Paul. They would have felt stunned, bereaved and puzzled, maybe even angry. Why was he going? Because God had called him to. This was God’s best for Paul and it was God’s best for the church at Ephesus. They were not Paul’s people, they were God’s people and they had to trust God

Acts 19: 23 – 41 As if the news that Paul is leaving them is not bad enough, now there’s a riot. I remember John Santamu saying that he wanted to be a disciple of Jesus like Paul. His problem was that everywhere Paul went there was a riot, everywhere John went they got tea & cake out! The Christian church was growing in numbers and power and not everyone was happy. One of the silversmiths who made money selling statues of the goddess Artemis, found his trade suffering. So, he caused a bit of a fuss to get rid of the Christians so he could go back to making a nice living. He gathered a group and stirred them up against the God that Paul was preaching among them. They began by shouting and baying for Paul’s blood. Notice the silversmith doesn’t do this himself, he stirs others up to do his dirty work! The result is uproar and a riot. Paul has to be kept away from the theatre for his own safety. The rioters shout their chant for two hours. Then the City Clerk read the riot act, literally, telling them all to shut up and go home or they’d have the Roman army marching into town to take over. He reminds them that Demetrius and his cronies have a process they can follow to complain, then he sent them all home.

Imagine being a Christian in Ephesus now! No more “high as a kite”. Fear, terror, especially if they had seen/heard the force of that mob. Where was God? Where was Paul, was he safe? Surely, surely Paul would stay now, he couldn’t leave them now. The riot had left them filled with uncertainty and fear I imagine.

Acts 20:1 once the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and after encouraging them he said goodbye and he left. They were not Paul’s people, they were God’s people and they had to trust in God

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians written much later, shows they had survived his leaving and had grown, it talks about unity, about the role of leaders, not lording it over the flock, preparing all of God’s people for works of service. The letter talks about living in light, not doing things secretly, about the mutual submission of one to another in the Body of Christ. It begins with a focus on the fact that it is Christ, and Christ alone who is head of the Church. They were not Paul’s people, they were God’s people and they

had to trust God. Whoever is leading, through the long history of PRBC, you are God's people, and you can trust God and God holds you in the palm of his hands.

In Revelation, many years later, Rev 2: 1 – 7 we find a letter from the Risen Lord to the church at Ephesus. Paul left them and they survived. Paul left them and they continued to share the Gospel with others and see lives transformed. They were not Paul's people, they were God's people. In Revelation the church at Ephesus is commended for working hard, for perseverance and for testing those who claim to come from God carefully. They are commended for not growing weary. They are challenged on one thing only. The one thing that grieved Jesus was that they had "lost their first love", they'd gone lukewarm. This passage is a call to rekindle our love for God, to reflect on God's love for us, and to move forward with trust and faith in God in order to share God's love with others

And as we begin a new chapter in our history? God is sovereign and this church is in God's hands. As we move into an unknown future what can we be sure of?

- that God holds this church in his hands as he held the church at Ephesus
- that this church will move forward just as the church at Ephesus did, through the Members Meeting, through listening to God, through holding onto the good things and letting go of the rest
- that the members here will commit to persevere and not grow weary. That you will uphold your leadership and ask God to give you the strength and wisdom to follow Christ into the future
- that Christ will remain Head of this Church

The challenge from the Scriptures is simply this – to Trust God

Trusting God doesn't mean that we'll have no questions or fears, it will simply mean that we will share those questions and fears with one another in love and openness as we journey together into the future that God has for us. Trust in God

Pray – for Derek, Carol, Sarah and Jonathan in the moving to Peterborough

- for the Leadership Team and the life of the church as we continue to move forward and out into the community in obedience to Christ
- Pray for Jonathan, Ewelina and the boys as they seek God's way forward
- pray for one another that we will fall in love with Jesus all over again
- give thanks to God for being there, for holding us, for protecting us from harm through all the ups and downs of the history of this church, for knowing the future and for giving us HOPE

Amen