**Renew Together 2025 2**

This is our second week of Renew Together – a focus on mission to the world across the seas. It focuses on the work of Arotahi, the Baptist Missionary Society

Last week was about head and we looked at Paul’s mission to Athens and how he found common ground on which to explain that the unknown God that they worshipped was actually our God through Jesus Christ.

This week is about Heart: The places and people we sense God's heart.

[video]

We read in Acts 19 & 20 about the ways in which Paul was captured by God’s heart for the world, and how that transformed the ways he went about mission.

Paul has moved on from Thessalonica, and Berea and Athens into in modern day Turkiye in a place called Ephesus.

In these chapters of Acts, we see that he shared the Gospel of Christ by words but he also showed the Gospel at work in the way he related and lived amongst his neighbours.

We are looking at his time in the city of Ephesus. Today Ephesus is one of the greatest tourist attractions of southern Turkiye with its amazing ruins and clearly discernible city. Ephesus was quite different to Athens. Ephesus was a city of magic and spirituality.

Ephesus was made a free city when Rome established the province of Asia Minor in 133BC. It was the seat of the provincial governor (proconsul). This status and its harbour contributed to the city’s growth. It had 200,000 inhabitants, one of the largest cities in the empire. The giant temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Worship of Artemis dominated the city.

*Acts 19:1-4 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”*

Arriving in Ephesus, Paul discovers some disciples – or so these men claimed to be, but the disciples there only had a partial understanding of God. They hadn’t received the Holy Spirit and needed to be open to more of what God had for them. These ‘disciples’ were still living in OT times, unaware of the new age Jesus had ushered in, and not filled with the blessing of the new age, the Holy Spirit.

*vv5-7 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.*

Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years where he argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Though he may have argued with their teachers in the lecture hall, we also need to look at how he lived among them:

*Acts 19:11-12 God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.*

Paul shows us the way of mission. He not only shared his knowledge, but he also revealed how this knowledge was transforming his whole being. This is the way we are to live too:

• Lived among them

• All humility and tears

• Endured trials

• Not shrinking back

• Proclaimed the message

• Recognised that the Jews and Greeks needed to know God, repentance and what faith in Jesus means.

• For each of these groups he identified different aspects to highlight.

The gospel message strikes at the heart of society – all spheres, all structures, all networks – but also works on the hearts of people, challenging and convicting, but also consoling and converting.

The gospel transforms societies and individuals. But it takes time – the worship of Artemis continued for another two centuries after this encounter with Paul. There was no instant fix, there was no instant abandoning of their own gods.

As I said, Ephesus was the centre of magic and spirituality, and we see the magicians trying to assimilate Jesus into their magic.

*vv13-16 Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.*

*vv17-20 When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.*

Many people came to faith, eventually admitting to their previous practice of magic. It was(not surprising that magic was part of their practice because magic was an everyday practice in Ephesus and the Roman world.

Paul challenged their magic practices:

People responded by burning their (valuable) magic books and scrolls. They were not taken from them but were offered voluntarily as an outward show of repentance and visible sign of their change of heart. The gospel was more important to them than the lure of financial gain such practitioners would have experienced. What we do with our possessions demonstrates where our heart lie.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In vv.23-41 we read of the upheaval in Ephesus caused by Paul’s preaching. Silversmith Demetrius stirred up opposition to Paul’s preaching and defended his goddess Artemis and the economic benefits her worship and temple brought to the city and to the silversmiths. There were complaints about the impact of Paul’s preaching on Ephesus’s economic wellbeing, about the potential damage this new god could do to the temple and cult of Artemis. Tensions escalated, a riot ensues at the theatre of Artemis, but the town clerk manages – just – to forestall a riot.

*vv23-29 About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: “You know, my friends, that 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 gods made by human hands 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.” … When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Soon the whole city was in an uproar.*

Paul’s message of Jesus stirred up people and inflamed their passions. His challenging of idolatry was having an impact on people and on business.

*35 The city clerk quieted the riotous crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? 36 Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. 37 You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. 38 If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges.*

The intervention of the town clerk shows that Paul and his coworkers were operating within the law. They focused on preaching the gospel, not undermining the structures of society, nor deliberately stirring up the people in rebellion. They didn’t insult Ephesus’ gods; they didn’t attack people and their places of worship. They simply preached the gospel and let the Spirit move how he wanted.

The gospel is a critique of all temples – Athens, Ephesus, Jerusalem, everywhere. We in the West like to compartmentalise life, separating religion, politics and culture into their own worlds with no cross over, but we need to know that not all peoples and places do this as we do. For most of the world these spheres are holistic. We as Christians involved in cross cultural mission need to grapple with this– the collision/mixing of these ‘separate’[[2]](#footnote-2).

The gospel message strikes at the heart of society – all spheres, all structures, all networks – but also works on the hearts of people, challenging and convicting, but also consoling and converting. The gospel transforms societies and individuals. But it takes time – God’s timetable, not ours.

One commentator said: “If the preaching of the gospel is having any real effect, sooner or later it will start to touch the political and economic structures with which our lives are entwined – and then watch out for fireworks!”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Unlike Athens where Paul could begin with shared convictions and move in the direction of the gospel, in Ephesus there is no common ground – there were no shared contact points.

Translation of the gospel into philosophical terms is one thing; translation into the language of Artemis’s cult is quite another, since there can be no accommodation for another deity.

Demetrius and fellow Ephesians demonstrated that, also from the side of the pagan cults, no compromise was possible. The potential loss of livelihood and the possible denigration of their goddess and the city’s role in guarding her temple – was strong motivation to protest Paul’s message.

The tolerance that generally characterised Greco-Roman religious life ceased when religious behaviour was perceived to threaten the local civil religion.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Yet even here, we see the transformation of people’s hearts, those who have come to faith in Jesus having their lives and orientations changed – the power of the gospel in action, for both Jews and Greeks.

We see the gospel challenging the heart of society – the power of proclaiming Jesus’ love unsettling the power structures and social and religious mores of the Ephesians and leading to reconfiguration/renewal/transformation at all levels.

The idea that Christians upset “the stability of the world” was an accusation made against the early Christians, but it was not a planned “mission statement” formulated by Christians even though the growth of the church in a region might have indeed led to a change of government and to the transformation of a particular culture at some point in time. Their intention was to love and show the God of love and grace.

What triggered the hostility of the silversmiths was not a programme to stamp out magic or idolatry, but the faithful proclamation of the gospel by the missionaries and the changed lifestyle of a growing number of believers[[5]](#footnote-5)

What we learn here is the lesson that by being so definite in our witness to the powerful name of Jesus that people will indeed find their vested interests radically challenged, while we are being so innocent in our actual behaviour that there will be nothing to accuse us of[[6]](#footnote-6)

Later when Paul meets with the elders of Ephesus, he reiterated this and summed up his time there:

Acts 20:*17-21 … Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. 19 I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

He lived among them in humility and tears. The late and lovely Shirley Andrews of this church was a missionary in Africa. She told us that Kiwis went to the mission field with minimal luggage and lived amongst the people. American missionaries on the other hand brought crates of stuff to make Africa a little America and isolated themselves from the people there.

Paul spent time getting to know the culture, He lived for 2 years in Ephesus. The gospel is sharpened and more accurately directed at the heart of society when, like Paul, we are committed to knowing the people and culture around us. When we fully live and engage with it and in it.

He committed himself to the city, to the local community and became a part of it, investing himself, his time, effort and preaching into the people of the city: “the work of witness requires serious expenditure of time”[[7]](#footnote-7) Paul appealed to people in the synagogue but also in the public square

Dr Mick Duncan, a NZer who, with his wife Ruby and their children went to the Philippines to work in the Manilla slums of Smokey Mountain. They went there knowing what he thought they needed, but ultimately his mission failed for one reason: He said that he had not identified how he could be Christ in that situation, by engaging with the people being ministered to. On reflection, he commented “…I saw our well-intentioned mercy-oriented work was in fact disempowering the poor. In our doling out of mission, missionaries and money, we in Servants were in active control but reducing the Filipino poor to passive recipients. We were robbing them of their God-given mandate to be all they were created to be.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Initially he had not done Paul’s looking and watching before executing a plan that did not include the locals.

Caring about souls and the real-life situations in which those souls move becomes authentic evangelism.[[9]](#footnote-9) Paul looked and saw the plight of those living in Ephesus.

Paul did not shrink back from proclaiming the message of the gospel of Jesus. He did not offer a weak watered down gospel message. Paul used reason, argument and cultural knowledge to make his case.

The German Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: If we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity, as one of the trials and tribulations of life.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Paul recognised that Jews and Greeks needed to know the God of love and to know what faith in Jesus meant. Paul knew what such faith meant in general but also what it meant for Ephesus and the Ephesians in particular. He applied the general to the specific of where he was.

Jesus was able to see the human dignity of each person he encountered, even where that dignity was expressed in a very different cultural form than his own human culture as a Jew, and even when that dignity was deeply damaged by moral failure.[[11]](#footnote-11) I think Paul did exactly the same.

We see that one size does not fit all when talking mission. The Athens approach would not work in Ephesus and vice versa.

As he did in both places though, he needed to know the people and culture to truly speak truth to it. In Ephesus, he did this through an extended time in the city, making it his home for 2 years so that the gospel could find a home there.

John Stott wrote that “When we contrast much contemporary evangelism with Paul’s, our shallowness is immediately shown up. Our evangelism tends to be too ecclesiastical (inviting people to church), whereas Paul also took the gospel out into the secular world; ours is too emotional (appeals for decision without an adequate basis of understanding), whereas Paul taught and reasoned; and ours is too superficial (making brief encounters and expecting quick results), whereas Paul stayed in Corinth and Ephesus for five years, faithfully sowing gospel seed and in due time reaping a harvest.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

His preaching was also accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles.

Remember that although this scripture is focused on going to another culture (from Israel to Greece to Turkiye) and observing and preaching the gospel, in New Zealand there are many cultures and subcultures in our society now. There is a fracturing of a metanarrative which says we all believe the same and it has created ‘tribes’ of different thinking and world view that we need to understand so we can speak into their way of life.

We need to spend time in non-Christian environments listening for God’s heart, observing and seeing with Holy Spirit eyes what is happening there and thinking how can we introduce Jesus into that culture?

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa Acts: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries,267 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acts for Everyone, Part 2, Tom Wright 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Loveday Alexander, quoted in Pinter, 454 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gaventa, 275, 276 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT, Eckhard J. Schnabel 818 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wright, 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gaventa, 285 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Duncan Costly Mission 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Engstrom & Cedar Compassionate Leadership, 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer The Cost of Discipleship 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jerram Barrs Learning Evangelism from Jesus 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Message of Acts, John Stott 314 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)