THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
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Today's Bible reading

Acts 19:1-10 ("Paul in Ephesus")

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?'

They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?'

They answered, 'Into John's baptism.'

Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.'

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Thy kingdom come - on bended knee (CH473)
Christ be beside me (CH577)
The Lord's my Shepherd (Townend version, on screen)
One more step along the world I go (CH530)

The apostle Paul, we can say with glowing certainty, was dedicated to his work. Dedicated, it would seem, to an almost superhuman degree. While many of the very first Christian converts in the Early Church might have carried on with their everyday lives in Jerusalem or in Rome or in any of a growing number of villages, towns and cities around the Mediterranean, Paul took another path altogether. To be sure, that indomitable apostle took a *vast range* of paths across his various missionary journeys, walking headlong into controversy and conflict, discord and danger. And all on account of his dedication to Jesus Christ.

In our reading this morning we find Paul in the fabled city of Ephesus. And if we do just a wee bit of historical digging we can quickly come to understand why he might have been keen to pay these people a visit. Ephesus, it turns out, was a great and mighty centre of huge population, of rich culture, of multiple religions, of cosmopolitan living. If ancient Rome was the New York City of its day, then Ephesus must surely have been the London, the Paris, the Los Angeles, the Tokyo, the Dubai. Ephesus was the economic powerhouse of what would today be known as Turkey, and people called it, "the mother city" of Asia.

While Jerusalem was rated as a pretty major sort of metropolis with perhaps 40,000 residents, Ephesus was a *giant*, with perhaps as many as three quarters of a million people within its bounds. But why should so many folk have come to live and work in this particular spot? Put simply, the location of the port of Ephesus made it one of the world's principal crossroads for trade: trade in all manner of stuff. It enjoyed an inland harbour which had easy canal access all the way to the Aegean at a stage of human history when sea travel was so much more efficient than using roads. Make your way to this affluent port and you could expect to sell your expensive wares for a profit before perhaps stocking up on an great variety of exotic items which you could take home and sell on, helping your business to boom. Ephesus was a strong and powerful magnet, and Ephesus positively dragged traders in.

The people to be found in Ephesus came from all over the known world. You could imagine camel trains slowly lumbering into the city from Arabia. Then you might spot traders of lapis lazuli all the way from Afghanistan in the east, or wood carvers from Nubia in the south. All brought their goods, their lust for profit and their lust for other things as well. Ephesus was where it was all happening, and Paul felt called by God's Holy Spirit to enter into life in this veritable hub of humanity. Did Paul have a plan, or was it just a vague inkling that he was somehow meant to be there? Might he have wondered about his safety, or was he simply determined to do God's will, no matter the cost. It is hard for us to say, though I suspect that he would have seen this particular journey as one that would be anything but dull or boring.

Our reading tells us that when Paul had reached his destination, he found in the city some followers of "The Way" - believers who had converted to the new faith of Christianity. He didn't mess about, asking them directly: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"

In other words, I suspect, Paul was asking them about how real their faith actually was. Did they look at Christianity with their heads and reckon that it kind of made sense? Or did they come to know in their heart of hearts the living presence of God deep inside them? In other words, was their faith a *head* thing or a *heart* thing?

In response to Paul's questioning, the Ephesian Christians said something along the lines of: "*The Holy Spirit?* … I'm sorry??? We're not quite with you. What do you mean when you say, "Holy Spirit?"

These people had been baptised into faith, but this had happened through followers of John the Baptist, the second cousin of Jesus who had come on the scene before him. John had urged the people to get ready for the arrival of the Son of God. He had told them that they were to make the way straight and get their lives in good order. But our reading perhaps suggests to us that, even so, there were still John-followers who had kept on preaching the message of John … rather than the Gospel of Christ. And so Paul did what Paul was bound to do: he told them about Jesus: the one who had come to tell the Good News of God; the One who would die on a cross and rise to new life at Easter. Then Paul went further, baptising these believers, "in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them."

Before running into Paul, these people had certainly come a good distance in their faith, *but they needed to go further*. They had heard that there was something new emerging in the world, yet they had never quite come to realise - deep within themselves - precisely what that *something new* actually meant, either for themselves, or for their city, or for their world. God knew the distance they had come, but God wanted them to move onward in their faith, arriving at a newness of relationship and a newness of life which would outshine anything they had experienced of God.

Very often in life people might be tempted to think that they have arrived at some kind of final destination in their personal living. They might have close family and good friends. Or maybe they have found their dream job. Perhaps they feel very, very content in their own skin, or in their neighbourhood among their settled community of friends. But then … one day a niggling doubt creeps in. Is this all there is? Could life be more? Could it be better? More real, perhaps? And what exactly would those words, "more" and "better" and "real" truly mean … for me?

What Paul is very firmly saying to the Ephesians is this: There *is* more. There is *so much* more than you have experienced so far. And in coming to faith in Christ the door is already open for you. Step through the door and discover for yourself exactly what lies beyond.

In the words of the psalmist: "O taste and see how gracious the Lord is." That, as it turns out, is what they did when a stranger named Paul stopped one day for a chat.

And as for us in our time, there is so much more to life than what we might own or what we might earn. There is so much more to life than sure contentment or self-confidence. We might be utterly convinced that we are the finished article, yet God might just surprise us in a moment of stark and life-changing realisation.

There's more. So what might those two words mean for you?

"There's more." More … of what?

"There's more." More … for what purpose?

"There's more." More … with what kind of meaning?

"There's more." More … towards what, as yet unseen, goal?

"There's more." More … just for me, or perhaps for many more besides?

I don't know why I am preaching this particular sermon on this particular Bible passage on this particular Sunday. But it might be that this sermon is meant *for* you and sent *to* you by the One whose powerful message has rung true right down through countless ages to countless ears, some of which have turned in keen anticipation to hear a clear, clear message which will change everything, and change it in the direction of God. Amen.

Praying for others

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down thy head upon my breast."

Lord, we pray for those in our community who are weary because of the anxiety caused by trying to make ends meet; weary because of ill health; weary under the burden of addiction; or weary due to loss or bereavement.
We pray for all who are weary asking that you grant them comfort, strength and healing.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's light.
Look unto me; your morn shall rise and all your day be bright."

Lord, we pray for those dark places in our world ravaged by war, oppression, injustice or human rights violations.
We pray for the people of Ukraine facing the daily struggles of invasion and war.
We pray for civilians in Russia and Belarus caught up in a war not of their making.
We pray for women and girls in Afghanistan repressed by the Taliban.
We pray for peace and for hope in these and other places around the world.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give the living water, thirsty one;
stoop down and drink and live."

Father, we thank you for your promise of wholeness in Christ. We pray that we find ways in our living and in our witness to share your promise with those around us.

I looked to Jesus, and I found in him my Star, my Sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk, till travelling days are done.

Amen.

Weekly Updates …

Monday Matinee in the church every week. Doors open 1.45pm, film starts 2pm. Followed by tea and coffee. On Monday 30th it's a 1951 film featuring a boat, a continent, the husband of Lauren Bacall and the star of *Bringing Up Baby* and *Philadelphia Story*. All welcome.

New-Age Kurling, now a weekly activity into at least the spring! Our two "come and try" sessions have proved very popular so we are keen to encourage anyone who might like to get involved to come along and have a game in either Room 2 or Room 3. All ages and levels of physical ability most welcome.

Wednesday Club, Wednesdays in Room 3, Longniddry Church Halls, from 2.30-4pm. Come along and enjoy fun activities, entertainment, chat, tea/coffee. (Contact Janet: 07766 574123.)

Sporting Memories Group, every Thursday in the halls 10.30am – 12pm. Come along, listen and share sporting memories with other older sports fans.

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