**Stowe Parish Church : August 1st 2021**

So, as Paul arrives in Ephesus, we come to the end of his second missionary journey. From here he will return to his home church in Antioch where the journey started and as Paul leaves Ephesus, Luke tells us Apollos arrives. So I want to reflect on the way God’s hand was in this journey as His plan for the good news of Jesus to reach all peoples begins to unfold. I want us to reflect on the places he visited, the people he met and then the Apollos postscript.

And see how these three aspects of this journey might encourage us in our faith journey today.

From the sense of calling to take this journey planted in Paul’s heart as he waited in Antioch and the blessing of his church as he set off we see God’s hand on this journey from the outset . And what a journey it turned out to be, very different to that Paul had in mind.

It took nearly three years from AD 49 to AD 52 with Paul planting new churches, encouraging fledgling ones and teaching and preaching the good news of the cross and new life in Jesus. He visited churches he had visited before such as Lystra and Derbe but he was then led by the Spirit to new places. If you remember he had been stopped from going to towards Ephesus in the early part of his journey because God had other plans for him. He was diverted to Troas where Paul had a vision calling to him to Macedonia where new ground was broken as he visited Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth.

Paul fully understood that it was God’s mission he was involved in : yes I am sure he would pray plan about where he thought he should be going but he was open to the Lord taking him in another direction. He was open to the promptings of the Spirit.

As we travel our own faith journey we need to be alert to the Spirit prompting us. Most of the time we pray and plan our way forward but occasionally we may be taken in a new direction.

During our journey Gill and I have been blessed with a couple of such moments. When we were living in Birmingham we ran a Youth/Student group and had taken them away for a weekend. During the closing prayer time one of the student medics felt the Lord was saying that we were going to move soon. This was not something on our horizon but felt if we were to move it would be south. Two weeks later I received a call to say I was being offered a posting to Merseyside. Even though it was not what we were looking for we accepted because of that word given to us. With hindsight the 6 years we spent on Merseyside were so good and we felt blessed to be there. Now I am not saying we felt Paul like, far from it we are just very ordinary by comparison but my point is God will speak to each one of us if we ask Him and wait patiently to be guided by Him. It might be a new place , a new job, a new friendship, a new relationship, a new way of serving the Lord, Whatever it is the following verse from Joshua which Gill and I clung to is ;

“Have I not commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go “

Secondly can we reflect on those he met.

What Paul achieved during his second journey is astonishing and his journey and experiences have also giving us insights to key people and leaders who were so important in building on the foundations Paul had laid. We think of those who travelled with Paul ; Silas, Luke and Timothy who joined Paul in Lystra , another Spirit prompt as well as those met on the way .

We also see that the Lord had gone ahead of Paul preparing the ground. For example Lydia in Philippi . She was a worshipper of God and Paul met her at a prayer meeting by a river. She responded to the gospel and became a follower of Jesus Christ and a new church began. Paul was able to preach in Thessalonica and was protected by Jason when opposition blew up but here again a church was planted, possibly in Jason’s home. In Athens it seems a small church was started around Dionysuis and Damaris.In Corinth we see another house becoming a meeting place, this time the home of Titus Justus . Also in Corinth he met Priscilla and Aquilla and Paul stayed with them. They eventually accompanied him to Ephesus.

So we see all along Paul’s journey there are those Lord has prepared to help Paul. Even though Paul was not expecting to visit any of those places, God has been there before him preparing the way .

I can look back over my faith journey and call to mind those who have been there to help me. I wonder if you can reflect for a moment of those who have been there for you, part of God’s plan for your life. It might be at the work place, in your neighborhood, in your family, in church but they helped you just at the right time. I am sure you could name some.

And there may be others who would say you were the person they remember when they look back

When you think about it this is amazing - that the Lord has given us a part of play in the lives of others and provided for us as well. I call it God’s tapestry of grace , we can never see the whole of the picture but we are all a stitch without which the tapestry will not be whole.

And so to Ephesus Politically and economically Ephesus was the leading city in the province of Asia­ Minor in fact it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire with a population of over 250,000

As we recalled, earlier in the journey Paul was diverted away from Ephesus This did not mean that God was against evangelism in Asia Minor, but it was not God’s priority for Paul at that time. Now Paul was in its chief city. He took the opportunity to visit the synagogue briefly and reason with the Jews. However, it was still not God’s priority for Paul and even though he was requested to stay and teach, he declined, He simply promised to return if and when God permitted. Indeed, later in his third missionary journey, Paul would spend three years in Ephesus

After Paul had left Ephesus Luke captures the arrival of Apollos in Ephesus which Luke clearly sees as significant. So again we see the Lord working His purposed out.

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, a great Egyptian sea port.There was a large Jewish colony in the city and it was noted as the intellectual, and literary centre for the Jews, indeed it was there the Greek version of the OT was produced And Luke tells Apollos was a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the OT scriptures who was an enthusiastic and eloquent speaker.

He went to the services at the local synagogue and spoke boldly about Jesus but we are told he only knew about the baptism preached by John the Baptist.

Obviously Priscilla and Aquila were in that synagogue service. As they heard Apollos speak they realized that he was missing something, his understanding of the gospel message was incomplete The baptism of John was no longer the end of the story , Apollos was perhaps not understanding the full implications of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection and more importantly the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost.

It is interesting that when Paul came to Ephesus on his third journey Luke tells us he found some follower of Jesus who were still focused on John the Baptists message of repent and be baptized, they were not aware of the baptism of Holy Spirit. So Paul taught them about Jesus and baptized them in His name and they received the gift of the Holy Spirit

Even today there are followers of John and his message and have not moved on to Jesus. We met a lady from Iraq on holiday a couple of years ago who was a follower of John the Baptist ( mandaeans )

Notice what Priscilla and Aquila did. They did not reject Apollos or criticize him instead they invite him home, and, lovingly and wisely, helped him understand the full gospel message . They would have heard Paul many times when he stayed with them in Corinth and were therefore able to gently teach Apollos what he needed to know. I think the passage from 2 Timothy contains a verse that seems to sum up what we is happening here

Paul encouraging Timothy to challenge false teachers

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved as a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth

.So we saw Paul teaching Priscilla and Aquila the truth of the gospel , then Priscilla and Aquila teaching Apollos so he could preach the the full gospel message

And Apollos became an important part of the early church and having moved from Ephesus to Corinth he was a key person in the church.

In the letter to the Corinthians we are told when he arrived in Corinth he loudly and vehemently convinced the Jews publicly showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was Messiah. So here we see Apollos following in the steps of Paul, well versed in the OT and able to speak passionately about how the OT scriptures and show that Jesus was messiah.

He is spoken in the same terms as Paul and Peter. This did create some division in the church as the worshippers speak of themselves as followers of Paul, Peter or Apollos. Paul had to correct them

5What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. 7So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8

Paul had great respect for Apollos and in the letter to Titus

we see Paul asking Titus to give hospitality to Apollos on his journey, an indication Apollos was visiting churches preaching and teaching

Martin Luther also considered Apollos as the author of the letter to the Hebrews

So we see how the Lord provided the right people at the right time to guide Apollos and help him become that key player in the early church. Bringing together Priscilla and Aquila from Rome with Apollos from Alexandria in Ephesus. God is not a God of accidents and he uses ordinary people to be part of his purposes. That is true of each one of us, never to young and never too old for God to use us in His service. We may not be a Paul or an Apollos but we can all be a Priscilla or Aquilla two faithful lovers of the Lord responding to God prompting them to reach to Apollos.

So three factors that hopefully speak and encourage us in our faith journey.

Firstly God is with us in our faith journey , indeed we are part of His purposes. We part of God’s salvation history, we may not feel it but we are that continuum that links us to that missionary journey .

Secondly the Lord will provide those to help us and those we need to help. We are always on active service for the Lord, God can use us for His purposes at any time in our lives. Be alert of God prompting us to do something for him just like Priscilla and Aquilla. Maybe we need to give someone a word of encouragement, an act of kindness, some guidance, maybe just to pray for them.

Thirdly we see the importance of clinging to the truth of the gospel. We have seen in Paul, and all those helpers in the churches he visited , and then in Apollos those serving the Lord and living out their new found faith based on the word of God, journeying together part of God’s salvation plan .

Let us rejoice that we are also called to journey together

in the truth of the gospel

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