



24. 'Insisting on Jesus in a multi-faith world'

Acts 19.²¹⁻⁴¹

Background

Eventually things came to a head in Ephesus! They always do! The impact of the gospel over the two or three years Paul spent there began to be evident not just in the lives of all the believers, but in the life of the city itself.

That's a helpful reminder that society is changed from the bottom up, rather than top-down: in other words, society is changed not by government legislation but by personal transformation – and as more and more place their trust in the Lord Jesus and live accordingly, the culture itself is changed. Indeed, one of the reasons for this extended narrative relating to the early years of the church in Ephesus is simply because it sheds light on the way in which the whole of the 'western world' was transformed. The bold and often costly preaching of the gospel; the continuing and increasing conversion of individuals; and the subsequent impact on the life of the city and the culture.

It's important to remember that the ancient world was very much a 'multi-faith' society: part of the genius of the Roman Empire lay in its readiness to adopt a basic 'syncretism', not dissimilar to the 'post-modern' values and ethos of our contemporary world where 'truth' is what you choose it to be. The 'state religion' of the Roman Empire, whose watchword was 'Caesar is Lord', lived quite comfortably with different peoples engaging in their own religions: such religious 'tolerance' was key to the expansion of the Empire. It was a 'do-what-you-like' and 'believe-what-you-want' culture which permeated the ancient world – very similar, as I say, to the world of the 21st century.

And, of course, the essentially *exclusive* claims of the gospel were just as unpopular and disturbing back then as they are today. In Ephesus it wasn't long before the implications of those exclusive claims were being felt: if the Lord Jesus is the one true God and Saviour, the One in and through whom *alone* salvation is found, then clearly all other 'gods' are no gods at all. It didn't take rocket science for the likes of Demetrius to work out what the consequences were for those (like himself) whose lives were invested in making money out of what was one of the seven wonders of the world.

There's much here pertinent to the challenges we face in proclaiming the gospel in the 'woke' and post-modern culture of Scotland today. **'Days' (2), (5) and (6)** are the ones with which to begin if you're short of time!

1) Monday 14th August – planning

Read [Acts 19.21-22](#)

“.. Paul decided to go to Jerusalem ..” (Acts 19.21)

Our plans may at best be only provisional: but forward planning matters if we're to live in a way that is purposeful, focussed and fruitful. God has given us minds to figure out the path we should be pursuing: and He's given us a Shepherd to keep us on track!

How should you go about getting the balance right between making definite plans and keeping those plans provisional?

In what ways is your planning (the day, the week, the month, the year) honouring to the Lord – and in what ways can it be dishonouring?

Prayer: *Thank You, O God, that You have called me in Christ to walk humbly with You. Help me daily to keep in step with Your Spirit, not rushing ahead or lagging behind.*

2) Tuesday 15th August – business and blindness

Read [Acts 19.23-27](#)

“.. Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people ..” (Acts 19.26)

There are none so blind as those who will not see. People were being set on the *right* path, not being led astray. It was *God* not Paul who had opened their eyes. And gods made by human hands *are* (by definition) no gods at all! The blindness of unbelief!

Why is the message of the gospel so 'disturbing' for our society today?

What would you say are the 'gods-made-by-human-hands' which are prevalent in our society today?

What would you say the real issue was underlying the concern of Demetrius?

What businesses and 'constituencies' feel particularly 'threatened' by the preaching of the gospel today?

Prayer: *How deceitful is my heart, O Lord! How easily I can persuade myself that what gratifies my own desires will glorify Your name. Guard my heart with Your truth.*

3) Wednesday 16th August – the irrationality of sin

Read [Acts 19.28-29](#)

“.. the people seized Gaius and Aristarchus ..” (Acts 19.29)

Preaching the gospel brings sin to the surface, and here you see sin's true colours. Emotion over-rides reason ('furious'): volume trumps any content ('shouting'). Finding someone else to blame is preferable for the sinner than owning up to sin.

What parallels can you see in our own society today to the pattern of what happened here in Ephesus?

How would you respond to the situation if you had been Gaius or Aristarchus?

Prayer: Keep me calm if provocation comes my way today, O Lord. Help me not to trade insults with others, but to entrust myself always to the one who judges justly.

4) Thursday 17th August – confronting sin

Read [Acts 19.30-31](#)

“.. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd ..” (Acts 19.30)

Our instinct is ever to defend ourselves – to justify our actions and to be vindicated. But sometimes ‘silence’ is more potent than speech: sometimes God’s providence is more eloquent than any preaching: and sometimes sin is best just left to run its course.

Is there someone for whom the Lord lays on your heart today a word of encouragement, reassurance, or warning?

Has the Lord been speaking to you through the cautions and warnings of others, to keep you from a particular course of action?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that You watch over Your people so carefully and keep us from courses of action which would prove neither necessary nor helpful. Keep me safe!

5) Friday 18th August – resorting to mantras

Read [Acts 19.32-34](#)

“.. they all shouted in unison for about two hours ..” (Acts 19.34)

What happened in Ephesus then, happens here today: the use of the ‘mantra’. Say a thing often enough and loudly enough – and people may then be fool enough to embrace it as the truth. The catchphrase today is different – the principle is the same!

Why was this particular ‘mantra’ (“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”) taken up in Ephesus”?

What are equivalent ‘mantras’ in today’s society?

How do such ‘mantras’ operate in our society today? How, in other words, is the ‘mantra’ repeated, and given such ‘volume’?

How true would it be to say of our society today, in relation to the ‘mantras’, that most of the people simply follow the lead unthinkingly (see v.32)?

Prayer: Our nation’s defiance is deafening, O Lord! The din of their denial of Your holy Word affords no room for any reasoned argument. Sovereign God, have mercy!

6) Saturday 19th August – respectful engagement

Read [Acts 19.35-37](#)

“.. they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess ..” (Acts 19.37)

The city clerk’s assessment of the conduct of the believers is suggestive of how we rightly engage with those of other faiths: a respect for their buildings, and care in the choice of language used in proclaiming Jesus as the one who alone is God and Saviour.

It’s striking that the city clerk can declare categorically about Gaius and Aristarchus (and presumably Paul, too!) that ‘they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess’: what does that statement about the believers teach you about your approach towards those of other faiths?

Idolatry is sin, and Jesus is the only Saviour: how do we balance the integrity of our message with a genuine courtesy towards those of another faith?

How many people of other faiths (including the ‘faith’ of atheism) do you know?

What opportunities do you have to share the gospel with them and how do you point up the exclusive claims of Jesus?

How do these verses help you know the better how to pray for those who exercise civic responsibilities in our society today?

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those who undertake the responsibilities of government: help them to act, and rule, in a way that makes for the true peace of our communities.*

7) Sunday 20th August – keeping your head

Read [Acts 19.38-41](#)

“.. we are in danger of being charged with rioting ..” (Acts 19.40)

Mob rule creeps in under many guises, not least today in the way that ‘trial’ is often by a media (and not least ‘social media’) which whips up public support for a particular agenda and brooks no argument. When sin takes root, reason goes out of the window.

How does this passage help you view the prevalence of ‘cancel culture’ and the plethora of disruptive ‘protests’ which have become commonplace today?

What is it about the gospel which provokes sometimes such an irrational reaction and response to it?

Prayer: *How good to be reminded today, O Lord, that You are the resurrecting God, and that whatever hostility may be directed against Your Son, You have the final say!*