

Called for God's plan

A huge thank you to Roger Thompson from CMSi who last week taught us from God's Word and introduced us to 2 characters Aquila and Priscilla who Paul meets when he first arrives in Corinth. They become co-workers with him in the mission of God. And at the end of our reading we see that he heads down to Antioch.

As a side issue, when you read these chapters always remember to do a little bit of homework in the geography and the timing. Because essentially Luke is taking us on a whirlwind tour in just a few chapters. Paul is covering many many miles, and the danger is to think that in a few verses it's only taken him a few days.

And so where we left off last week, he is back in Antioch for a well deserved rest after the two or maybe three years that he has spent on the road in his second missionary journey. But before there is chance to take a breath, Luke continues with the story in verse 23 where we begin today.

Luke records that “**After spending some time there [Paul] departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples**”.

So this is his third missionary trip and he's starting out alone. Barnabas or Silas are not with him, although he is heading out to familiar areas where he has been before. And Luke says that his purpose is to go out and strengthen those that he already knows.

It's no good us being entirely focused on reaching out to people in our community and sharing with them about Jesus if I as your teacher am not also ensuring that you are strengthened. It's like if all I did at home was for Alison and I to raise two boys but not send them to school every day, then they will not mature and grow. Yes they might physically grow, but they won't grow in knowledge and understanding. It's the same for all of us, we need strengthened daily. Remember what Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17. He prayed, “**My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth**”.

And this is what is so important in these times folks, that all of us are built up in the knowledge of God's Word. I've more and more realised that I can run around day after day in my own energy, but this won't truly sustain me. I've got to be saturated in God's Word which gives me wisdom, which in turn gives me direction, from which action comes, knowing what God wants rather than what my mind thinks it wants. Paul knew that there would be no chance for maturity without the Word of God, and therefore he knew it was important to devote time to strengthening and building up the disciples.

And so now in our passage there seems to be a second story taking place which centres around a man called Apollos. It says he was from Alexandria and it says that he had a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. So let's again provide some context.

Alexandria was the second largest city in the Roman empire. This city had one of the largest libraries of its time with over 700,000 volumes, and therefore people such as Apollos would have had access to the scriptures. This city took pride in its intellect and what it knew. And so Apollos would make an incredible impact in his eloquent words and knowledge in his speaking. Can you imagine the abilities that Apollos would bring with him, to be able to engage with the Jewish culture as well as the Greek culture which was the norm in Alexandria – boy this person is going to make an incredible impact. And his experience would therefore have meant that he would be able to adapt to many different contexts because of where he has come from.

But we have to remember that Paul is going to have to write a letter in the future to the Corinthians to challenge them for putting Apollos on a pedestal because he was such a dynamic speaker. In 1 Corinthians 1:11 Paul writes “My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ. Is Christ divided?” And he finishes by telling them, “Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Sometimes people devoted more time to the person giving the message rather than the message itself. It’s like our appeal for particular Christian speakers because they are funny and dynamic, when in fact our focus should be on the message. And so Paul diverted that away from himself. Apollos may have been a very polished orator but it didn’t mean he was completely informed. Yes, someone had told Apollos about Jesus. It says that he spoke accurately. And yet with all his education the scriptures say he only knew of the baptism of John.

There’s a lesson for all of us in here, and I know I have been caught with it in the past, where we can watch or read from different theologians or evangelists, and they come across as very polished, but it doesn’t mean they are speaking truth. We must examine their teaching for ourselves.

But why is it so important for Luke to state that Apollos only knew the baptism of John? The message for its day would have been startling to the Jews, as it meant that forgiveness of sins came as a result of repentance. The need for a sacrificial offering through an animal substitute where its blood would have been shed on people’s behalf was no longer required. The act of repentance was what God wanted, and therefore the visible expression of this would be through an act of cleansing through baptism.

Apollos knew of the teaching of John, but he was missing something. John announced that there would be one coming after him whose shoes he was not worthy to carry. John had baptized the people with water, as a symbol of the forgiveness God gives. But Jesus would go further; he would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He put life into his followers. He would give them power (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16).

Apollos knew many things, but he knew nothing of the cross, nor of the resurrection, and he didn’t know of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. His message was basically incomplete. The message had not got to him, and therefore whilst his teaching was eloquent, it wasn’t complete.

Apollos needed to know the rest of the story. Sadly the church today also needs to know this. People are ok with knowing that God sent his son, they're ok with knowing that he died on a cross, but when it comes to the Holy Spirit, it's kind of muffled over a bit in my opinion. If the Holy Spirit is let loose then I think people feel it can be a bit chaotic. We can put God the Father and God the Son in a box ok, but people don't know what to make of the Holy Spirit. And yet it is the Spirit of God living in us that equips us, that guides us, that empowers us, that produces the fruits in us of **love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22&23)**. And that's what I have been learning personally over the Christmas and New Year period that, like Apollos you can have all the credentials, you can have all the eloquence, but we must be directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit so that the message we give has life, and that the message we give is the message from God and not ourselves. It's not your effort, but it's what's living in you that compels you to love and to share.

And actually it's in that place of love, filled by the Holy Spirit, that Priscilla & Aquila demonstrate those fruits as they introduce themselves to Apollos in the Synagogue. They could have sat and listened to what he said, and just completely had a go at him because he was missing points in his doctrine or ridiculing him to other believers about how wrong he was. No, they invite him to their home. They could see the passion and the boldness with which he was willing to teach, and wanted to encourage him further. They didn't come from a place of correction, telling him he was wrong. No, with patience, with kindness, with goodness, with gentleness they explain to Apollos the more accurate presentation of Jesus.

Just think about this amazing picture of God at work. Paul has discipled Aquila and Priscilla, Aquila and Priscilla will disciple Apollos, and then Apollos will go and disciple other communities from this. When the couple follow Paul to Ephesus Paul moves on, but they don't. Obviously God is at work for them to stay on, but why? Well here's the answer. Where do they find the couple? They are in the synagogue. Remember that the couple are Christians so they have no need to be there now, and yet here they are sitting listening to Apollos because God has directed them to make disciples. They were obeying the call of God to minister to others.

I love the way in which people have been joining our church family to receive teaching because they maybe haven't received the teaching in other places. Many of us love to be fed on the Word of God, but can I encourage you to think about the model of Priscilla and Aquila. They could have sat in their house church and just received teaching every week but not do anything with it. Through their feeding they had the opportunity to feed others. **Here's a little picture to help.**

For those that have had children, you will remember that period when they needed to be fed. They couldn't feed themselves. All children rely on someone else to feed them.

When the child grows into a teenager, like my two boys, they can feed themselves. In fact I often listen to the noise of the kitchen cupboards or to the fridge being opened as they quite happily help themselves to whatever they want. And on occasions leaving us with nothing. But when they come and ask me to make them something, I often will tell them that they are quite able to get something without me. Adolescents are able to feed themselves.

But when it comes to adults, they can feed themselves but they can also feed others. No adult sits and is fed. They are beyond that.

Priscilla and Aquila had said goodbye to Paul, but it wasn't then to sit around and do nothing just because Paul wasn't there. It wasn't for them to sit and be fed but do nothing else. God was teaching them their role as disciple makers in their own mission field.

I am so glad that we have such love within our church family but have you ever wondered what your purpose in it is. You are being fed, and I love that you are, but you are being fed so that you can feed others. Everyone of us that loves God has been gifted with something that someone else can be fed with. And everyone of us who is going through something in life will need the care, love, encouragement, the wisdom from someone else in church who has already walked that road before. So as you come this morning to be fed in God's Word, come expectant and open to how God wants to then use you from here to feed someone else in your life, and how he wants to comfort you through someone else watching this morning.

The model of the early church in Acts 4 shows how much they were willing to share life together. **They were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.** It wasn't just possessions, it was caring for each other, it was lifting one another up, it was strengthening each other in God's Word.

You see what Paul was trying to teach was that each of us, whether we are Paul or whether we are Jonny, we are servants, and we are all co-workers in God's service. Here's what he said the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3 and I think as he said it he probably recalled how he had left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, not realising the potential of what God was about to do through them. Here's what he says, **"What, 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. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building"**.

I love the humility of Apollos. He's a learned guy, and yet he is so teachable. Here are tentmakers approaching him asking that they explain the gospel further with him. Apollos could have quite easily said, "I don't need any guidance from you, I'm fine thanks. I don't need tentmakers telling me what I don't know. I'm an educated person". But Apollos had a heart that was willing to be shaped by other believers, and so he welcomed going to the couple's home. In this past week I chatted with someone who wanted to share thoughts into ministry. They weren't a pastor, they weren't a bishop. They are a friend. And whilst they chatted to me about my ministry, I did not shut off my heart to hear what God was saying to me through them. I didn't say I was a minister and was above them. I listened to them. I welcomed it, and I was glad how God was able to use them to shape me. I came in humility to listen to a fellow brother in Christ so that Christ could shape and mould me more.

Paul is teaching against the idea of hierarchy, because there is no hierarchy in the Kingdom of God – we are all co-workers. You know there will be many who will know the ministry of Billy Graham, but I wonder how many of you will know the ministry of **Mordecai Ham**. You see Mordecai was a farmer in North Carolina but God called him to set up a tent ministry and begin to preach. One evening he gave an invitation, and 3 people came to the front including an 11 year old boy called Billy Graham who that night gave his life to Jesus. So who did a greater work? Billy or Mordecai?

No one knew who Priscilla and Aquila were. They were just ordinary people faithful to God, but everyone knew who Apollos was. The couple were faithful to God. They were willing to do whatever, not seeking any attention from it.

And here's the effect that their service had on Apollos. Our reading says in verse 27, **"When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed"**. His message had now changed as a result of what 2 tentmakers had shared. He has heard the complete story. Before he had only heard about the baptism of John, now he understands the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now he can talk about grace, not just about works. He understood that it was not about what he had to do, but what God through Jesus had done. And the incredible thing was that he was able to refute his Jewish opponents using scripture that Jesus was the Messiah. Remember that the New Testament wasn't written at that stage so he was able to argue from the Old Testament writings.

Paul was grateful for the ministry of this mighty man of the Scriptures, but it all began with Paul feeding and strengthening 2 tent makers.

As you and I consider our lives today, are we still infants needing fed, or can we feed ourselves but that's as far as it goes? Paul calls on all of us to be co-workers in God's service. Today, equipped by the wisdom of God's spirit and his giftings, are you able to see your Apollos's around you that you can pour into, following God's plan? There is no greater joy than to be doing what you are called to be in God's plan. Paul could see it in a couple of tentmakers. I long and pray that you live your life the way that God wants you to, so you can see the amazing opportunities before you that he has planned. How incredibly exciting to see how God can powerfully use his church in the days ahead.