

Acts 19:21-41 Wrestling with idols

You know, if I was to sum up the Bible in a few short words I would always go to what Jesus considered as the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:37 and that is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. That's been in there since an early age, and I think why it sticks is that so often in life I put other things before God. Not one of us if we are truly honest can say we always put God first. Other things come in front of him all the time, and so we need to come submitting everything to his lordship. The core reason for giving our lives over to God is not some kind of get out of hell card, and that in some way it improves our morality, and we start getting involved in the church. No that's not the core reason. It's so that we return to the heart of worship and place God as God over all things, where we realise the finality of this earthly life, and boy have we all seen the end of life over this past year with COVID, but then to place God as the only thing we need in life.

If you get that concept today then you are going to see how applicable our passage today is to you. In our passage today we will see how the Gospel challenges the things that have become more precious to people in a city, and how the threat of placing something before these things invokes a riot.

So right at the very start of our talk today, we have to consider what things would invoke us towards anger if they were challenged. Would we be willing to place the things that we hold precious to before what God wants for us? Ultimately anything that comes before our worship of God is an idol. But what do you think an idol is? You know, we are very good in Northern Ireland Protestantism at observing what we consider as idols in the Roman Catholic church in terms of statues, but we very rarely consider the things we hold to as precious as idols also. Let me repeat. If we place anything before our worship of God then that's your idol. And so we are all guilty of it.

So here's a little background on Ephesus. Ephesus was the richest city in the Roman Empire. It was very cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic. It had the largest temple which was dedicated to the Goddess Artemis otherwise known as Diana. The temple was 4 times the size of the Parthenon in Rome. The statue of Artemis which was the centre piece of the temple was carved out of a meteorite that fell from the sky, which is why you have the reference in our reading of the City Clerk saying that her image fell from heaven. She was considered the protector of the city who guaranteed prosperity.

And so we learnt last time that Apollos brings the gospel into the area and if you were to read the verses earlier in this chapter you will see the incredible transformation taking place across the city with people walking away from their idols and those involved in sorcery burning their scrolls in public. To give you an idea of the scale of this change in the city, what was burnt (50,000 drachmas) equates today to about £2-3million. Can you imagine the impact on a city if £3 million of assets was to go up in flames. News of it would spread very fast.

So obviously this transformation and spread of the Gospel was having an effect on other people, namely those who would be making money out of the worship of Artemis. And one such man Demetrius had been making little silver ornaments of the Goddess, but now his whole business has dried up because people no longer are worshipping false Gods. You can imagine how he and other traders would be feeling – their jobs and livelihood would have been threatened.

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It was clear that the people felt threatened about losing something such as Artemis that in their view brought such prosperity to their community. Artemis offered everything to the people. In fact her statue displayed her stomach absolutely covered in breasts representing that she gave life, that she brought nourishment, that she provided for people and that's what the people clung for.

It was claimed that she gave fertility and helped women conceive. She was the mistress of wild beasts and therefore she would provide food for you when you went out to hunt. And she was also the Goddess of death that would provide people with the strength and courage to face their end of life. So she brought life, she provided for life, and she cared when life was coming to an end.

And so Demetrius whips everyone up into this frenzy and a large crowd moves towards the amphitheatre screaming 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians'. And in amongst all the anger and all the confusion one city official steps forward and brings order to the crowd. They're angry that someone would try to threaten their god, but the official assures them of the greatness of Artemis, of their reputation across the world that Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of their goddess and there is no need to be rash.

He sort of says the same thing that one of the chief leaders in Jerusalem says at the Acts 4 when they bring Peter and John in front of the religious leaders after a lame beggar was healed. They had done nothing wrong, and so it was better to play the whole thing down hoping that this new following would fade and go away.

Now that we have the hindsight of the future, if you look through the New Testament you will see that Ephesus becomes the epicentre of Christian mission sending disciples across the Roman world. It becomes a hub for sending people out about the Gospel. You can look through church history and see how over hundreds of years Ephesus becomes this place for missionary journeys. And so it definitely doesn't fade after Paul leaves. The idols disappear and as verse 20 says 'the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power'.

So what's different between Ephesus and us? You might say we don't have any idols like Ephesus did, but if we remember that an idol is anything that becomes more important than our worship of God, then they are all around us folks. When we consider how much time we spend per week in worship, in devotion, in prayer and we then compare this to how much time we might spend on other things, well that will show us where our idols are. If I was to place my 4 hours of golf as more important than my daily devotions and prayer life then golf becomes an idol. So we are no different than Ephesus. At particular times of the year around our streets we will put flags out – they are idols. In non-COVID times we will be seen investing greatly in leisure or our homes and all kinds of things. Those can be considered as idols if they become our focus more than God.

So if we want to see Ballyclare and Ballynure and the surrounding areas change and move away from idols of every day life, then the Gospel has to take root in people's hearts. That's what happened in Ephesus but it didn't come without a fight. The picture of Ephesus shows us that the Gospel confronted the idols, it infuriated the people, and it gave what the idols couldn't.

Let's consider **CONFRONTATION**

Do you remember what happened to Paul when he went to Athens? He walks in and he saw that the city was full of idols. And so Paul preached that the idols were insufficient and Jesus is the true King. This is what he did everywhere. He saw the things that people clung onto for worth and joy, and he would show that it was insufficient to give you what you are seeking for. Idols had to be pulled down and replaced with Jesus.

So for each of us, what's the idols our lives? What is it that brings you satisfaction, or security or joy or hope? What would it mean if it wasn't there? Think for a minute what that might be. Remember that they are likely not to be bad things in any way, it's just that they may have now become your god thing, they've become the ultimate thing for you. Here's some examples of idols today.

Money can be an idol. If I have enough money I feel secure. But also you can reverse it. If I make sure that I don't have too much money then I know I'm ok with God. In both examples you are not looking to money as a tool to be used to bring more glory to God; you are looking to money as a God. Free will offerings can become an idol, where you have to make sure that you put something in the envelope every week even though you have not been to church for years, but it's important to you to put the money in and collect them up for the end of the year. So ask yourself, are you doing that to give God the glory in your worship, or are you doing it so as to somehow secure your place in heaven when that day comes? Or are you doing it because it makes you feel as though you have done something good and morally right?

You can literally turn anything into an idol. Your reputation, your career. Ministry can be an idol. If enough people can be part of my church, if we can fill the pews then I will have satisfaction that I've done it. Church buildings can become an idol where we become so precious about their upkeep that we focus more on it than how we can draw more people to Jesus by the message.

Here's the thing. Idolatry will always break the heart of the worshipper, because it's not able to give you what it's promising to give you. And so the Gospel confronts all of this, with love, but piercing right to the heart, by saying the thing you are looking to, cannot give you what it promises to. They are false gods that ultimately will destroy you. You need to come to the truth of Jesus who is Lord.

And as a result of confronting the idol, it infuriates the idolater.

In verse 26 Demetrius remarks that Paul "says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all". Paul essentially is saying that Artemis cannot save them. She is not their creator. She cannot provide life. It's a lie.

Because every part of their life depends upon the security blanket of Artemis; their livelihood, their future, everything, they then explode. They know that what Paul is saying, if its right, means that everything they've held on to is worth nothing. And so fear creeps in. They have wasted everything for short term gain.

The best way to look at what your idols are is not what you love, but what are the things that you fear happening. What do you get really defensive about. If someone was to say to

you, you need to get rid of that, what's the thing that is going to make you snap. When idols are ripped away from us, or exposed as false gods, we want to defend them with everything we have.

As I was writing this, I was thinking about the riots that took place a few weeks back on Capitol Hill, Washington DC, where people marched for their rights. Now irrespective of what you think about that, the point is that the people marched, rioted, and even killed because the things that they hold onto as precious were in their view in jeopardy. They may have been claiming they were taking back their country, but in the eyes of God they were defending what has become their idol.

So the Gospel confronts idolatry, it infuriates the idolater, and finally it gives what idols cannot give.

Any idol we look to, or a community looks to, we will find that Jesus gives what that idol can only promise. Ephesus was inevitably turned upside down for Jesus, because Jesus freely and truly gives life. Artemis falsely promised this, but Jesus died in our place for our sins. In John 10:10-11 Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. 11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep".

Artemis promised provision to all who worshipped her, but it was all false. Yes the silversmiths were provided with income, but it was only because of the flocks of people coming to the city to see the incredible temple that kept the money coming in. They were keeping the fantasy alive. But Jesus freely gives the provision that Artemis only boasted for, because he forfeited his heavenly riches and his position at the throne of God, becoming a man and walked among us. He forfeited all of his blessing and ultimately submitted to the cross so that we could receive all the blessing that we didn't deserve. He assumed our state so that all of the sin could be dealt with and all of the blessing that he is owed could come to us. Now that is provision. To be a Christian we are identified as being in Christ. Paul talks about this all the time – 2 Corinthians 5 If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. Romans 8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3 For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. It means that what Jesus is owed, you and I get. That's provision like the world cannot give. It's an inheritance kept for us that as Peter says is unperishable.

So let's finish. The security that you are looking for, the pleasure you seek, the fulfilment you desire, the legacy you want to leave, nothing can be found in created things. Honestly I have been beside too many gravesides in the past 12 months and I can tell you that created things will count for nothing. With all the provision, wealth and wisdom allotted to Solomon, here's what he wrote in Ecclesiastes 2 "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil.

11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun".

Let's not chase after idols in our lives folks. Let's invest in the Kingdom of God. True riches of eternal life are freely given to you by your creator who lived died and rose again to give it to you. He gives what idols cannot give.