

Comment on Ephesians 3: 1-12 for 6 January, 2019

The ruined city of Ephesus lies on the western seaboard of Turkey. It was said to have been founded by the Queen of the Amazons and later was settled by the Greeks. It was the site of the Temple of Artemis, as the Greeks called her, or Diana as the Romans called her, the goddess of chastity, hunting and wild animals, forests, but also fertility and childbirth. Her temple was vast, the largest in the world at that time, an important religious centre, and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The Greek period was followed by the Lydian conquest and their King was Croesus (you will know the expression, "rich as Croesus", meaning fabulously wealthy. He invented coinage, circulating gold coins, later shown to be naturally occurring gold and silver alloy). Next came the Persians and later the Romans, at which time Paul lived in Ephesus for a couple of years, about 54 AD, co-ordinating missionary activity in the hinterlands. To place it better historically, Vesuvius erupted over Pompeii 25 years later, in 79 AD.

Ephesus was an important city, probably second only in size to Rome. Mary Beard, the archeologist and historian, points out that large cities in the ancient world contained people of many races from all over the empire ... much the same as for many cities today. They came to learn, in the hope of jobs, or to seek opportunities for a better life.

In the translation of the passage from Ephesians in the Good as New bible, Paul says "God gave me a special care for those excluded on racist grounds". He is referring to the fact that the Jews believed that God's promises were for them only, not other races, but Paul emphasised that the death of Jesus had allowed those promises to be extended to everybody. Paul had had experience of racial prejudice when worshipping at a synagogue in Ephesus, so he left the city, wanting to create a community to reflect the different thought and culture God had inspired through Jesus. He said Jesus had put God's ideas into practice. Although Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, he wrote the letter to the Ephesians from prison in Rome, saying, my preaching has got me into trouble. This letter to Christians is an exhortation for a better attitude and behaviour, an encouragement to communicate with one another, to do tasks well and to help others.

Tribal loyalty is a strong emotion; in our time it has recently been seen at football matches, where racist slurs have had damaging effects. Fear and anxiety about people who are different, not least in skin colour, are natural, if you have never met anyone with those characteristics. You could say the same about bias against the Scots, the English and the Northern Irish, not to mention Australians, if you don't know them well. Of course there are always differences between people from various geographies, but they are rarely threatening, unless one sees an economic threat, an alleged driver in the Brexit debate. We should speak to strangers, find out their interesting background... perhaps they need help? Paul goes on to say "Seek unity with *all* of God's people, no matter what their culture. You'll find that the love of Jesus has no limits." and again, he says, "every Christian [should be] engaged in work that will benefit the whole community", a clear urging to work with others in a multicultural society, ... which could equally well apply today.

We visited Ephesus some years ago and were astounded that the main street was paved with marble and there were huge buildings on either side. One particular structure intrigued us, a public toilet with marble seats, side by side, right around a large open space. It was intriguing to think I might have sat where Paul once sat. If you are seated so close to someone else in such a place, you cannot keep yourself separate. Talk to

your neighbours, wherever they come from. Attitudes change when people show love for one another ... a message straight from Jesus.

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