

ACTS 18:18-28
PEOPLE, PEOPLE, PEOPLE... AND GOD!

This has been an intriguing little series of sermons - God is on a mission! It has all been about God working with people. Why is that so surprising? When we talk about Church, somehow we think of 'it' as an entity, an institution; we see it as something 'out there' that we somehow belong to, but that has a life of its own. Everything we've tried to do for years now is to persuade ourselves that the Church is people. Remember the image that used to be here and that used to be our logo? Here it is with people standing on each other's shoulders, holding each other up - we said that this is our church family; or these photos on the wall - these are the people who are the church in Juniper Green, this is what church is. Our new logo is the same: a group of people with Christ in the middle. All of this is trying to remind ourselves that the Church is people, people who love Jesus, who believe or who want to believe, people who want to be ready to live in the ways of the Lord. When there is a task to be done it is easy to be focussed on completing the task and forget that the church is people, the people who belong to God. Yet the church will only live, breathe, grow, and develop as the people live, breathe, grow, and develop!

The story of Acts is the story of God and His people working hand-in-hand. We've tried to show something of that in these last few weeks. Who were the people who were in at the start of the new churches in Philippi, or Corinth? A businesswoman, a slave girl, a retired soldier, the synagogue ruler, some Greeks and then we run out because we're not told about the rest. These were the people who started the churches, Christians who were there at the beginning and wanted the church in their town to bear witness to Jesus and to grow. Other people were there too: Paul, Silas, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila, people with leadership responsibility, some of them travelling preachers (preachers are real people too!!) and others with other jobs to do. God is at work in all of these people, helping them, inspiring them, guiding them, picking them up when they've been knocked down, giving them grace to deal with all kinds of trouble. Here we see God and people working together to build His Church, to tell people about Jesus, to bring faith to their first century world. God is still on a mission in our world, in our time and here's the great thing, the church is still God and His people working together, partners, co-workers with God to bring Christian faith to our twenty-first century world.

It is a great adventure to be part of and it is always an adventure when God is at work. We're never sure what's going to happen next. We've been working on an idea of some evangelism outside the church building that needs some co-operation with other people and we weren't sure if that co-operation would be forthcoming, but in fact he is delighted to work with us, enthusiastic even; this is a real answer to our prayers and God is at work. We'll say more about that in due course! There is a sense of adventure that God is on His mission and we are partners, working together with God. People have always been God's answer to the needs of world, but not always easy answer. Here are two quotes from Chris Wright: at the very start of the Bible story, the world is in a terrible mess. What can God do next? "Only something God could have thought of. He sees an elderly, childless couple and decides to make them the launch pad of His whole mission of cosmic redemption" (C Wright *The Mission of God* p199), and the story of Abram and Sarai is "the beginning of God's answer to evil of human hearts". It became an exciting adventure, people involved in the mission of God. But it is not always easy: "Christianity summoned proud pagans to face torture and death out of loyalty to a Jewish villager who had been executed by Rome. Christianity advocated a love which cut across racial boundaries. It sternly forbade sexual immorality, the exposure of children and a great many other things the pagan world took for granted. Choosing to become a Christian was not an easy

or natural thing for the average pagan." (C Wright, *The Mission of God's people*, p36) Yet people came to Jesus in their droves; the Church grew and grew, people loyal to Jesus, living out their faith; God is on His mission.

Apollos is a new person for us to get to know. Paul has moved on from Corinth and has travelled back to Jerusalem and then to places he'd visited before and Luke takes a little time to explain all of these journeys; they matter. Paul is on his way back to places he'd been before "*strengthening...*" (Acts 18:23) He is building people up in their faith. Meanwhile, his friends Priscilla and Aquila have been dropped off in Ephesus, the ancient city on the coast of Turkey, ruins of which you can still visit on your holidays. It was a commercial centre of the trade-routes between Rome and the East, centred on its harbour and the river that took people inland; it was the capital of the province of Asia; and was the city where the great temple to Diana was to be found; the silting up of the river spelled the end of Ephesian importance. It became a centre of evangelism for Paul later, but for now Apollos is there and is causing a stir in the church and in the city.

Apollos turns up in Ephesus. He is a Jew from Alexandria, in Northern Egypt. "*He was...*" (Acts 18:24f) Let's see what we know about him. First of all, he is a learned man, he is intelligent; he knows his Bible from back to front - no real surprise there because Alexandria was the place where the famous Greek version of the Old Testament has been produced. He has been taught in the way of the Lord, so we think from that he may be a Christian; he knows something of Jesus, perhaps as a historical figure, what He did and said and certainly as a preacher he is full of zeal, fervour, and enthusiasm. What he says about Jesus is right, accurate; he is not telling any lies. But there is an intriguing comment at the end: "*he knew...*" (Acts 18:25) His faith is not wrong, but it is not complete; there are gaps in his knowledge and his experience, it would seem; has he picked up a garbled version of Christianity in Alexandria? Priscilla and Aquilla take him in hand to fill in the gaps and by the time he goes off to Corinth, he is a fuller Christian and a more effective preacher and the church in Corinth is blessed to have him.

A garbled version of Christianity? How easy it is to pick that up! Twenty-first century Scotland has all kinds of garbled versions of Christianity that we can pick up, versions that look and sound about right, but they've not got everything. First century Alexandria was the same and so Apollos is not the finished article as a Christian preacher. What's missing? Luke says that he has "*A thorough...*" (Acts 18:24) which sounds impressive and it is, but bear in mind that these scriptures are the Old Testament, so for the Christian preacher they only paint part of the picture. "*He knew...*" (Acts 18:25) John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus and John's baptism was all about repentance for sin, while pointing people to Jesus who would come after him. John is the last member of the old spiritual regime so to be a follower of John is to look back to the old ways and to our sins and doesn't necessarily embrace Jesus and faith. What Apollos knew, he preached with great fervour and enthusiasm, but there were gaps; enter Priscilla and Aquila, wife and husband, quiet people of faith, to take him in hand.

"*When Priscilla...*" (Acts 18:26) It would have been great to know exactly what that conversation was all about. What did Priscilla and Aquila teach him? We don't know, but we do see two mature Christians taking Apollos under their wing, mentoring him in his faith and explaining things to him. I expect that they explained to him the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and even more likely explained to him what these events meant, that Jesus is the Saviour of the world, the Messiah sent from God to bless the world. Perhaps they explained to him the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and that by the Spirit, Jesus is with His people always and everywhere

and that we can experience that. Maybe they talked to him about the treasures and promises of faith and how Jesus promises to help His people live our lives by faith day by day. Apollos knew *about* Jesus as a historical figure, perhaps, but he didn't *know* Jesus as the living presence with him to bless him. Whatever it was, God turned Apollos into an even more effective preacher through the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila.

I have a mentor and still occasionally run things past him when I'm not sure what to do next about an issue. As you know I have spent a bit of time mentoring people training for ministry, though the church has only just started calling it mentoring, How many of you did an apprenticeship? Sadly apprenticeships are lacking in many trades now! An apprentice learns from watching and working with and listening to someone who knows the trade, who does the job; now you may also do day-release at college, but the apprentice develops experience and skills through these relationships. How much experience of Christian faith, leadership and service is in the room this morning? Those of you who are older and wanting to take more of a back seat (though I'm not sure Abram and Sarai were given much of a back-seat in their 80's), have you considered sharing your experience with someone younger? Have you thought that you can give the benefit of your skills and experience and faith to someone younger as a Christian, or to someone growing up as a leader? This is not about telling them what to do and saying that your way is the best, but is about giving them an opportunity to learn, so that experience is not lost! Consider it! Apollos was better for it!

You say "I've so much to learn before I can be of any use to God!" I'm afraid that's not way it is with God. God can work through all of us, no matter. There is a famous story of the great Victorian preacher CH Spurgeon: one Sunday, he was sitting in the back row of a little country chapel near Cambridge, listening to the preacher and the preacher's sermon consisted mainly in repeating his text over and over again. But God was at work and that preaching, poor as it was, was the means by which Spurgeon became a Christian and so began the faith and the ministry of one of the greatest preachers of Victorian London, influencing thousands of people. We want to be good, but we don't need to be good; we need to be available. There are signs that God worked in and through Apollos even before he knew everything; the imperfect Apollos still had his place in the mission of God. People, people, people - that's what God needs to go about His mission in the world; that's what God needs to build His Church, people who are available to serve and when we are available to serve, anything is possible for God, even God building His Church in pagan Scotland.

A work in progress - that's the church. We are God's building site where things are messy, but God is at work to create a masterpiece. Apollos went to Corinth, the mission of God at work. Later, Paul would write: "*I planted...*" (1 Corinthians 3:6) That's how God works: people give of ourselves for a good purpose, people live for Jesus, people tell others, people love and serve our community, people come to worship, people mentor others, people care for the weak and needy. This is the mission of God in the world; God builds His Church; God extends His kingdom. It is a great adventure and we all have a part to play; the challenge for us is to play our part to the full!