

URC North Western Synod, March 2016

The Church – Octopus or Bicycle?

Ephesians – maybe sent to the city of Ephesus, maybe circulated in a broader area. But credibly linked with the part of the world the Romans called Asia and we would call western Turkey. So maybe the background to the letter was something like this.

The principal player in Ephesian culture was Artemis, local fertility goddess turned patroness and protector of the city and its people. Everyone knew that Ephesus belonged to Artemis. She gave the place a reputation, and a series of lucrative twinning arrangements with cities in distant lands. A lively tourist trade resulted, with plenty of work for craftsmen, making souvenirs for visitors to take home. Artemis gave the city some its best architecture. She shaped a good deal of the economy, many of the employment opportunities, the calendar of public holidays, festivals and sports events. Artemis even ran a bank: the local savings and loan institution traded under the goddess's patronage. Artemis reached across the town and across the earth.

More than this, for many people in Ephesus Artemis reached into a world you could not see. The magic and mystery to which you could reach out through spells, secrets and strange ceremonies – what we could call the occult – was territory she owned. The stars in their courses were a realm she was believed to rule – people said that her image had fallen from the heavens – as were the fates and fortunes the stars controlled, and the influence these might have on you. The sky belonged to her, the world of spirits, and the souls and anxieties of the people. This was a wrap-around culture, a religious claim that met you on every street corner and waited for you across the whole stretch of your life.

To be a Christian then in Ephesus, to belong to the church in that region, put you on the edge. Your community was dominated and your world overshadowed by another kind of power. Forces and fears were abroad in your land that had little room for the claims of Christ. Neighbours would think you strange, eccentric, misled, out of step. You would be tempted to hide, withdraw, stay in safe company, mix only with like-minded friends. This was a setting in which Christians were likely to run out of confidence, to fear that they had very little to offer, to be constantly on the back foot, always keeping their head down, sensing that their community danced to a rhythm other than theirs.

Which may be why this letter speaks so plainly and often of the power of Christ, of the majesty and might of his resurrection and ascension, of his supremacy over every 'rule and authority and power and dominion'. This language is not a power play for a well-positioned church, but is a word of assurance for a fearful church, a fresh perspective for a people who might be intimidated by the system within which they live and in which they bear witness to a very different Lord.

And that is where our text comes in, to say that your witness – even in a culture where you are painfully small, even in the face of arrangements and attitudes that seem to blank you out, even amid stories, superstitions, spirits and ceremonies that claim the world and leave no room for your good news – even there, your witness is worth bearing. It has power and potential. When you live for Christ, when you follow the gospel, when you act as church, when the wind of the Spirit

breathes through your fellowship, you are making known 'the wisdom of God' to 'the forces and authorities' that dominate your culture. You speak back, you offer grace and wisdom, you act out an authentic pattern of living and caring.

So might it be so for us, that we are called, despite our size, despite a culture that sometimes wants to blank us out, despite our sense that the tide no longer runs our way – we are called to make God's wisdom known, to play a tune that resonates with the deepest longings and needs of the world, to display in action a true and holy way of being human? Not by a plan or programme, but by being: by being true to our calling and true to Jesus. Then God, by 'the power at work within us, is able to do much, much more than all that we can ask or think'. We deal with a God of surprises, who multiplies what we offer; a God of alchemy, who turns the ordinary metal of our service into the gold of grace.

That's the point to which Ephesians 3 brings you: what the church is called to do; what we are here for; what God means to do through us. Then Ephesians 4 speaks of how the church is called to be: what are the gifts, the hopes, the habits that will bring this about?

One is **UNITY**: we've heard it before. How we hold together, what we are with and for each other, shapes what we are in the wider world and for our neighbours. A church is only likely to know about care and compassion, to have skills and habits in forgiveness and peacemaking, to be attuned to the complexity and pains of our neighbours' living, to want to bother, if we have learned and practised those ways of being in our dealing with one another. The things we have in common as sisters and brothers in Christ are a treasure to nurture, a mandate to follow, seeds to grow, foundations on which to build. We shall not do outreach well, unless we also relate well to one another. A local church that binds people together of different sorts and types, of varied backgrounds and needs, of diverse gifts and circumstances, will be a church that can look outward with hope and love, with a sense of possibility and promise, with a belief that God is already interested and involved in the lives of people, places and this planet. 'I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

Part of the reason for treating other Christians as valuable, for shaping our living in relation to theirs, for reckoning the whole life of the body of Christ as greater than the sum of its parts, is that each Christian is gifted by God's Spirit. 'Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.' The church is not a body of the inert, led by the inept. It is a body of gifted, graced people, a company where each has something precious to bring to the life and work of the whole, a family in which the presence and experience of every individual is part of a broad tapestry of grace, displaying the love and reality of Jesus Christ, speaking back to everything in our culture that devalues, degrades, despises or disadvantages the living of others.

So let's come on to the second theme of Ephesians 4: unity, and now **ENERGY**. The church is a people with something to offer. Christ's gifts bring momentum and direction to the life of his people. This chapter speaks about nature and nurture: what gifts are given, and how they contribute to our life together. Let's start with nature. 'The gifts he gave were ...'

The different gifts energies and patterns of service that Christ shares among us are gifts of the Spirit. They come from the ascension. They reflect and embody the power and spread of the love of Jesus. They echo the emphasis elsewhere in scripture that as Jesus is ascended so the Spirit comes; as Jesus leaves his people, he does not leave them alone; as he steps aside they discover a new energy and confidence. 'The gifts he gave were ...'

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. 'Officials' one writer calls them. That's not the word I would have chosen. Officials can be pretty set characters, difficult to move on, locked into formal ways of doing things. And this passage speaks to me of something that might be fluid as well as formal, that is about the flow of the life of Christ rather than a locked-in set of habits and rules, that is certainly personal rather than narrowly procedural, that may involve God's surprises as much as any systems of ours – we have just been told that God will can do more than all that we ask or think.

Apostles are adventurous – the accent here is on outreach, on noticing where God's mission might be leading us, and taking the risk of following. Apostles get the gospel into new places, in word and action. They take some of the knocks that go with that outreach, and give the rest of us the courage and confidence to join them.

Prophets are perceptive. What is prophecy in the New Testament? There is no very simple answer. But it generally seems to mean something like this: prophets can read their times and their context; they have a sense of what's going on in the world and where God might be within it; they know how to share this insight with others; and they have a pastoral instinct – they can speak in a way that is constructive, enabling, strengthening.

Evangelists are expressive – they have the knack of commending the Christian faith to people who do not yet know Jesus as well as he knows them. That means being interested in people, being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes and speak in a way that makes sense to them, and being confident enough in Jesus to want others to know him too.

Pastors are patient – they know how to support others through the thick and thin of the years. They can get alongside another person, win their confidence, and handle that confidence with integrity and respect. Pastors are used to dealing with different people in different ways; they are not fazed by awkward and wayward individuals; they are richly blessed with common sense, and they want to see the people around them living secure, wholesome and happy lives.

And teachers talk – they help others to strengthen their grip on the Christian faith. They have clear minds, honest words, the capacity to help others discover and deepen their knowledge of Christ.

Now three things I don't believe about those gifts.

(1) I don't believe they're narrowly concentrated, so that if you're a pastor, the person next to you probably isn't. A church might have quite a lot of people with pastoral gifts. That means, lest you wonder, that I don't think in any local church you are likely to find all of these gifts in the Elders' Meeting and none of them outside it; still less, far less, are these gifts exclusive to clergy. Most clergy are good at some of these things; a few are good at several of them. But nowhere and never is that meant to set others in the shadows.

(2) I don't believe that the URC has been equally good, in my time, at expressing all the gifts. As a fellowship we are a bit more comfortable with the stable than the novel, the known rather than the risky, the settled life of the church rather than the tangled life of the world. Our leaders have often been better as pastors and teachers, than as apostles, prophets and evangelists.

(3) I don't believe that any of these gifts can safely be overlooked and bypassed. A church, even a local church, needs them all. If we are not apostolic, we shall never think mission: our towns will change, our times will change, and we shall not. If there is no prophecy, we shall be shaped by habit rather than hope, by grooves more than by grace. Without evangelists we shall have nothing to say to our neighbours; they will think us self-centred, and our faith will grow stale among us for lack of air. If no-one is pastoral among us, we shall ignore the needs and hurts in and around our fellowship. And without teaching we shall be all good intention without the stability of knowing why we do it.

So who is there in your local church who's a bit of an apostle, who can spot where God's mission is leading and nudge the life of the fellowship in that direction? Who's got something of the prophet about them, who helps you to believe that God is at work among and around you? Who is good at sharing the faith with outsiders, at helping your neighbours to trust in your Lord? Who has the gift of caring, and communicating the care of Christ? And who can help you make sense of the faith and grow in knowledge of God?

There are probably people around who are good at these things, without realising it, who would never think of themselves as gifted by Christ. But we need this balance, this fivefold expression of the life of the gospel. Without it we shall not become the churches we could be, or the Christians we should be. We need to value gifts, and those through whom these gifts are given to us.

Which brings us round to the reason gifts are given: 'to equip God's holy people for the work of serving others and for building up the body of Christ'.

For those who like fine detail, here is my reading of the detail of this text:

'to equip' is the bit of this verse that governs the other two bits; the three expressions are not in parallel, not on an equal footing; the short introductory words change – 'to, for, for'; gifts are given to equip, to repair and renew, to get in order, the life of God's holy people – in other words to give the church energy and confidence; and the energy and confidence are there for two purposes; one purpose is service – the word can mean humble service of other people, it calls up an image of Jesus girded with a towel, washing the disciples' feet – Christians are equipped and enabled to be generous, active, involved, busy, compassionate, committed, humble; and the

second purpose is growth – growth together as a body, as a fellowship, and you're back to unity, and the witness of the church as a lively body of people, belonging together.

So the task of the church in any age is to nurture the gifts, so that the gifts may nurture us; to enable those who are gifted, so that they may enable others; to let God give to the church, that we may give to the world; to value every member of the fellowship, because they have something valuable of Christ to share; to let the gospel work among us, because God can do much more than all we can ask or think. And in an era and a culture that sometimes seem to blank us out, to recognise that we have something worthy, hopeful and God-given to share, which can speak back to all that destroys and diminishes God's world.

So what about the title: octopus or bicycle? Some images of the church might tend to see it as an octopus. One leg for apostleship; one for prophecy; one each for evangelism, care and teaching. And that leaves three for inertia, for wrapping round a rock, and making sure that the other five never actually accomplish anything fresh or go anywhere new. Stability we call it; lack of vision might at times be a better title. Maybe God is saying in our day, You won't go, unless you let go. Which brings us to the bicycle. Here of course you don't go unless you let go. You only get stability by moving. A stationary bike is very unstable indeed. A bike with wheels, pedals, chain, limbs, steering, and even occasionally the brakes, all working together, can be stable and mobile both at the same time. It will only be one if it's the other.

The church that is octopus might get caught and conflicted between reaching out and holding on. The church that is bicycle might will find that its energy gives it stability, and stability comes from moving forward, and moving forward will in turn generate a sense of energy. All of which might reflect something of the life of Christ.