Leaders, Community and the Gospel
Acts 20:17-38

As we're going through Acts we're seeing how Christianity had the kind of radical impact it did on the society and culture of the first century. Because her opponents weren't exaggerating when they said at the time that Christianity had 'turned the world upside down'.

But the world of Acts is very different from our own. Back then, Christianity was the new kid on the block. Today, at least here in the West, Christianity is seen not so much as something new, but as old news, even bad news, part of the traditional establishment, to be rejected as a result.

But to reject, or accept something you really have to know what you're accepting or rejecting, don't you? I mean someone might say, 'I don't like tea' – but you question them and all they've ever had is that compost stuff, that herbal stuff made of grass clippings and horse manure. They've never experienced a cup of Earl Grey tea poured from a bone china teapot. And often when it comes to Christianity what is being rejected is a caricature – they've never experienced the real thing.

Well, in today's passage we're going to get a glimpse of the real thing, the kind of community, the kind of new society that the gospel can create – and that can turn the world upside down, then and now.

Last week we left Paul in Ephesus. Since then, he's travelled down into Greece, before starting to head back to Jerusalem. But this time, he takes the boat, and on his way back he lands at the port of Miletus, south of Ephesus, where we pick up the story.

Acts 20:17-38

Three points: A different type of leader; a new community, and the way to get there.

A Different Type of Leader
I don't know if you've been to a party where there are lots of Swiss people, but it's a nightmare to leave, isn't it? You decide to head home at 10pm, but then it takes you another hour and a half to get out of the door because of all the kissing and the hand-shaking. Well, that was clearly the way it worked in Ephesus as well. You see, we know from what comes before that Paul's in a hurry to get to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. But he's got all these friends in the church at Ephesus and if he stops off there he knows he'll never get away. So instead he calls for the elders of the church to meet him at Miletus.

And what he says to these guys is fascinating because it's the only time in Acts where we get to hear Paul speaking specifically to Christians and to Christian leaders in particular. And most commentators agree that the key verse is his charge to the elders in v28: 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.'

Now I don't know how many of you read books on leadership in the work place, but if you do you'll know that in the last couple of decades there have been a number of books published addressing the issue of Servant Leadership. In fact 10 years ago James Hunter published his book titled 'The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to Become a Servant Leader.'

And yet, the mere fact that books like that get written tells us that leadership in the boardroom and on the shop-floor may have been less than positive. And you don't have to spend long in the work place before you realise that leadership often seems to have more to do with a person's ego and self-advancement, than the care and service of those they are called to lead.

So what Paul says here is fascinating, because he calls on these men to be a different kind of leader from what they and we have experienced. Look what he says. 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.' And the order is fascinating isn't it? 'Pay careful attention to yourselves' comes before 'and to all the flock'. In other words, Paul is saying that you cannot, as a leader, care for the flock unless you are first caring for yourself. But Paul doesn't mean by that that the Christian leader should put his interests or his needs first, or advance his own career at the expense of others, or be self-protective, or set up boundaries. Paul means that the leaders of the church need to be paying careful attention to their own souls.

When Paul writes to Timothy, his protégé, he says to him, 'Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching' (1 Tim 4:16). It's the same thing, isn't it? You elders, Timothy, make sure you are feeding and nourishing your own hearts in God, because that is the only way that you stand any chance of doing the same for the flock. So, far from this being 'serve or promote or protect yourself', it is 'feed yourself, care for your soul, so you can care for others'.

You see when Paul says to these men that the Holy Spirit has appointed them to '*care* for the church of God' he uses the verb 'to shepherd'. So Paul is saying to these guys that they have been called to care for their people, for the church up there in Ephesus, as a shepherd would his flock. And how does a shepherd care for his flock? He doesn't fleece it, does he? He leads it, he feeds it, he waters it, he protects it, he dips it in disinfectant to get rid of bugs, he delouses it. In the words of Jesus, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. In fact, Paul implies that the kind of leadership he is looking for these men to exercise is just that kind of self-sacrificial leadership – because that's how Jesus established the church in the first place: v28 again, 'to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.' If Christ laid down his life for the church, shouldn't her leaders?

So, can you see how Paul's call for these men to exercise a different kind of leadership is no less radical now than it was back then – because it strikes at the heart of our desire for self-advancement at the cost of others. And when he makes that call, he is really just rephrasing the words of Jesus, the ultimate servant leader: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant." (Matt 20:25-26).

But listen, why does Paul get these leaders together in the first place? Is it just to give a little leadership pep talk? No. Paul senses that his time is running out, v25, 'I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again', and he wants to ensure that the right kind of leadership is in place so that the church thrives in his absence. You see, Paul knew that as leaders go, so go the people. And Paul has a vision for how the church should really be. What the real thing should look like. He's looking for a different kind of leader for a different kind of society.

A New Community

About a month or so ago I was contacted by two gymnase students who asked me to complete a questionnaire for them. They wanted a Christian perspective on homosexuality, for a project they were doing. They aren't Christians and so I tried to do the best job I could. And having done it and spent hours over it, they were clearly grateful and so I asked them, 'no pressure, but now you know my views, would you be willing to meet me to tell me yours. I'm not trying to convert you, I just want to hear what young people like you think about this issue.' And they very kindly agreed – and the three of us met over a drink this week. And we had a great time together. They said that of all the pastors they had written to I was the only one who took a different view on homosexuality, the only one who used the Bible in my answers, and the only one who wrote 10 pages! Which I think was a complement!

But two things struck me as we talked. One was their genuine longing for a different kind of society: a society that was tolerant, where gay people didn't face discrimination. And when I pressed them on what the foundation for such a society would be they said it was that unless someone was causing harm to anyone else then an individual's behaviour was ok. What was wrong was to cause harm to others, including emotional or psychological harm, and so telling someone their same-sex relationship was wrong was harmful and therefore wrong. And that's a very common view isn't it?

But, of course, what if I was to turn around and say that them saying I am wrong also causes me emotional and psychological pain? Are they not then being intolerant of my view? You see we need something better than our feelings to decide what is right and wrong in life, don't we?

But the second thing that struck me was that they wanted everyone, regardless of sexuality, to be able to experience this wonderful thing that we call love and falling in love. What one of them literally called the transcendence of love. And most of us know what they mean by that, don't we? The emotions, the passions, the feelings of love. But it occurred to me, sitting across the table from them, that they would consider me an emotionally repressed Englishman, if I suggested that love was nothing more than some chemical reactions, and electrical signals, of no real significance. And what's all the fuss about. And yet, in an atheistic world-view, where life has no ultimate meaning or purpose, there is no ultimate meaning to love, no transcendence of love. But we all know, and my two friends know, there is more to love than that.

And so these two great young people long for a different kind of society, one of tolerance and love, and yet their world-view will never give them that.

Instead what Paul talks about here did and will result not just in a radically different kind of leader, but in a radically different kind of community where both truth and love flourish.

Number one, it's a community where the truth of the gospel, not confusion, is the defining message. If you remember from last week, there was a near riot against Christianity in Ephesus. And Luke tells us that the crowd was in total confusion – no-one really knew why they were there. And today things are little different are they? Moral certainties and absolutes are passé, you can have your beliefs and I can have mine and whether these are true, or not, doesn't really matter. Confusion, rather than certainty reigns.

In contrast, Paul emphasises the truth of the gospel of God's grace as the determining world-view of this new community, the church. In v20 he says, he taught 'in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.' In v24 he describes his ministry as testifying 'to the gospel of the grace of God.' In v27 he says, 'I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God' - the full story of God's loving, saving grace. And when he's just about to take his leave of them he tells them v32, 'And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace.' As John Stott says, Paul 'taught the whole gospel, to the whole city, with his whole strength'.

So if confusion marks Ephesus in the 1st Century and the West in the 21st, the certainty of the message of God's grace – that God has done everything we need to be saved in Christ, that he does not treat us as our sins deserve – but way better than we could ever deserve – that's the message that runs through this new community, like writing through a stick of rock.

And just like the farmers in Valais are increasingly on their guard against the wolves who are coming back into Switzerland, so the leaders of this new community, have got to keep the message of God's grace *the* defining message. They've got to feed the sheep and shoot the wolves.

But secondly, this new community is one marked by humility in place of pride
You see, the first thing Paul does is to get these leaders to reflect on his example: v18, 'You yourselves know how I lived among you… serving the Lord with all humility.' Humility, he says, in the face of outright opposition and hostility. Now just think about that. How do you respond when you face hostility over something you believe strongly? Often our response is either fight or flight isn't it? We either run or we fight back. We either withdraw or we meet aggression with aggression. And those kind of responses when the gospel gets challenged can seriously hamper our evangelism. The flight response leads to Christians inhabiting their ghettos. The fight response leads to an aggressive, argumentative, holier than thou attitude that just turns people off. Both hamper effective, winsome evangelism.

But what Paul has in mind here is a deep, unflinching commitment to the truth of the gospel as the defining message of the community, lived out in real humility, even in the face of aggressive opposition.

But thirdly, it's going to be a community where hope abounds, even in the face of uncertainty. Look what Paul says in v22, 'I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Holy Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.' Paul knows that his life will be in danger. In v19, he speaks of his tears and his trials. In v23 he says that he knows that 'imprisonment and afflictions await' him wherever he goes.

And no doubt he senses, as his friends from Ephesus probably sense, that they too will face increasing opposition against the gospel. They face or will very soon face the same uncertainty.

You see, being a Christian does not give us a free pass on suffering. And some of you are facing it now – the uncertainty of life, the uncertainty of the cards that are dealt you. And from one perspective, the future looks anything but certain. And how do we respond to that? Often we want to be masters of our destiny, don't we? That's where this drive for euthanasia comes from. We want to be our own master, master of our own lives. But Paul describes himself as constrained by the Spirit – literally 'bound by the Spirit'. Paul knew who his master was and it wasn't Paul. Paul knew he was in much safer hands.

And knowing that, Paul could live with hope and faith and purpose in the midst of uncertainty, precisely because he knew the future was certain. For Paul, his life was not *the* thing. Survival at all costs was not what mattered to Paul. Instead, v24, 'I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course.' Why could that attitude give him such hope? Because he knew his reward, the prize for finishing the race, lay ahead. That's what he was running for, not a reward in this life.

Fourthly, this new community is one where generosity flourishes in place of selfishness. As he finishes Paul can say in v33, 'I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.' Instead, he's set them an example, v35, 'that by working hard in this way we must [not may, but must] help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Now think how different that is from our consumerist, must-have culture. We think we'll be happier if we earn and get and hold on. But instead it makes us miserable, because we never have quite enough, and there's always something next we need. And Jesus says, 'you know what, you'll be much happier if you give away.' And so this new community that has the gospel of God's grace as it's defining message is going to be one marked by radical, outward looking generosity. That we don't live to please ourselves, we don't even work for ourselves so we can roll in it, we work and earn that we might have something to give and share with the weak and the poor.

Fifthly, and finally, this is going to be a community where there is love in place of discord. As Paul takes his final leave of them, they kneel down and pray

together, and they all end up weeping, and hugging and kissing one another. Isn't that a bit too *emotional*? No! These guys loved one another. They had every ethnic, racial reason not to. Every reason why they should keep their distance, and yet there is genuine love and affection for one another. It's the mark of this new community.

But listen, if that's the community, if that's the new society these leaders and you and I are to work for, how are we supposed to get there? If that's the city we're to build, which road will get us there?

The Way to Get There.
How can these Ephesian leaders, and you and I, regardless of whether you're in a position of leadership or not, serve and care and pour out our lives for one another? And promote others rather than ourselves?

You can do it when you realise that Christ did it for you. You see when Paul says that Jesus bought the church with his own blood, he means you. And when it sinks in that Jesus has served you, by laying down his life and dying for you. That the Son of God, who had every reason not to, did that for you. You'll get the idea too.

How can we be a community that is marked by humility and not pride? When we realise that Christ humbled himself for us. And when you realise that Christ had to die for you, to rescue you from your sin, and it dawns on you just how sinful you really are, you won't respond in pride and arrogance and aggression to those who differ from you. You'll recognise if it wasn't for God's grace, you'd be saying just the same things.

How can we be a people of hope in the face of the uncertainties of life? Because we know that our future is safe in the hands of the one who said, 'I am the resurrection and the life'. And when you know your identity is in Jesus that he loves you and cares for you, as a shepherd for his sheep, you can face hardship and suffering and pain. Because you know he is working everything for your good and his glory.

How can we kill our selfishness and covetousness and be a community marked by generous giving to others? When we understand that God is the greatest giver, and that Jesus gave more than just money to us, he gave himself. In the face of such love, how can we hold on to our stuff?

How can we be a place where love flourishes instead of division? When we know that in Christ we are more loved than we can ever hope. And so is our neighbour.

You see when the gospel of God's grace to us in Christ really is the message that defines this new community it will be so radically different from the world around that it could yet again turn the world upside down.