

THERE'S A LOT GOING ON

John 10:11-18
Acts 18:24-28

This is our last look at the stories of the early church found in the Acts of the apostles, and you might think it's a strange place to end, with a small vignette of this little known man, Apollos. But I like this little story, because it tells us that there were others out there, besides Paul, Peter and perhaps Barnabas, who were spreading the good news about Jesus.

In writing, Luke has focussed on the apostles: which is why his work has been named "the Acts of the Apostles" and Apollos is not an apostle. Indeed, when we first meet him here, you might say that he is only marginally a believer. That is, he believes what he knows but he doesn't know all that much. He is a cosmopolitan Jewish believer; someone who knows scripture well, and who is looking for something better than the conventional interpretation of that Scripture and the usual practise of religion.

Somewhere or other he has heard about Jesus - heard stories about what he did and what he taught, and he realises that this is someone who teaches a radical new interpretation of the familiar Scriptures, and who is promoting the Kingdom of God. He has heard of John the Baptist, who points to Jesus, and how he baptised Jewish people (a ritual usually used for Gentiles who converted to Judaism) as a symbol of repentance, of turning away from the old towards a new life lived for the Kingdom of God. He too has undergone this baptism. Now he is going around in Jewish circles proclaiming Jesus and his new Way, and urging a baptism of repentance.

And doing this he comes to Ephesus. There, there is already a Christian presence, established by Paul, and there the Christians realise that Apollos hasn't got the whole story straight. There have been times in the history of the church - far too many times - when such a realisation would have been the cue for public denunciation, even persecution and violence. But Priscilla and Aquila avoid such scenes. They don't confront Apollos in public, as he is arguing in the synagogue. Instead they take him aside privately and quietly explain to him that the good news is even better than he knows. They would explain that while repentance, turning away from past sin and error is important, the baptism of Jesus (rather than John) is a baptism into Jesus, and, since Jesus is God's Son, that means into God, who gives us his Holy Spirit to seal the relationship and the new state of being.

I admire Apollos, because he is not afraid to speak out about what he believes. And I admire him because he obviously is aware that he might not have the full story yet. So when Priscilla and Aquila take him aside he doesn't seem to take the huff - as he might have: he's an eloquent speaker and has had quite a bit of success in with his message. Instead he is glad to learn, and so the church is not weakened but strengthened.

And so we learn that there are others out there, doing the work of evangelists - spreading the good news, building the church and bringing in God's Kingdom. We have non-Biblical stories about what some of the other apostles did: Thomas going to India, and Andrew to Greece and so on. But here we see someone who is not an apostle doing his bit to spread the word.

Jesus said "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." He was talking to Jews, and he was beginning the shocking idea that God's love might not be reserved for one chosen nation, but be extending out, through him and then through those who would follow him, to all the nations of earth.

This little story about Apollos is a heads up to Luke's readers, reminding them that there was more going on than Luke chronicled. It is a heads up to us as well, reminding us that our local situation is not the whole story of the Gospel.

Next Sunday evening we will be hearing for the first time about our new partner church, Luwatala, in the Presbytery of Zomba, Malawi. I am so pleased about this. Too often when we think of the church in poorer countries - and Malawi is indeed a much poorer country - we think only about what we can do to help, in material terms. But we are entering a twinning: a relationship of mutual learning, mutual encouragement and mutual support. I have no doubt that the news of what God is doing in that small corner of Africa will become a source of encouragement to us, who labour for the Gospel in this small corner of Scotland. We work against the background of a people who have had the gospel built into their culture for generations: though this has, over time, distorted the popular idea of what it is Jesus taught, and what we believe. They work against a background of enormous need, where people look to the church to provide help and support for those who would otherwise be left to die.

There is a lot going on in God's Kingdom and it is good for us to remember that our own parish, our own Presbytery, even our own National Church is nothing like the whole story. When we are told of a reduction in church membership or attendance, remember these things:

In Ghana one church leader recently complained to a visiting Scottish delegation that young people were a problem in his church. They might have sympathised with him, recounting their own experiences, but it became clear that he didn't have the same meaning of "problem". His complaint was that so many young people had started coming to worship - over 700 the previous Sunday - that the older folk felt a little left out. There's a lot going on in God's Kingdom.

In India, not a predominantly Christian country, one where the Gospel has progressed slowly, a recent Scottish visitor was impressed by the growth in the number of churches, the number of ministers, of members and of young people. He commented "this is a church on the move." There's a lot going on in God's Kingdom.

We have heard a lot from China in recent weeks, and of course China is a communist country where the church has been violently persecuted at times. However one Olympic story which did not gain press coverage was that the Chinese government of Shenyang province, where the football tournament was staged, assuming that many of the visitors who would come to watch the games would be Christian, gave £296,000 to help renovate the local Anglican Cathedral. The church in China is growing at a tremendous rate, proving again that old adage that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. There is a lot going on.

When, in the 1980s I sent some time in Indonesia, I learned that the people there who were training to be ministers would not be ordained until they had planted three new churches - each. And they did. God was on the move.

In all the trouble in Kenya earlier this year, a couple visiting from Aberdeenshire witnessed how a Kenyan minister, already coping with three churches, was moved to open a fourth. For two weeks no one came, but then something happened and now there are 80 previously un-churched people worshipping and 50 of a Sunday School. O, that it would happen here, we may moan. But be encouraged: There is a lot going on in God's Kingdom, and we are a part of that Kingdom.

The little story of Apollos calls us to have hope. There is more going on than we might think. It calls us too, to remember our unity with all who seek to follow Jesus. Later, the Christians at Corinth were to fall out with each other and divide their

factions along rival personalities. “I’m Paul’s man,” one would say, while another would say “Oh, I think Apollos was a better example to us.” Paul would have none of it. “I planted,” he wrote to them, “Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:6). God gave the growth.

Christ is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for all his sheep, and we are just one little part of the great flock whom he calls to follow him. Our story is locally important to ourselves. It can be enlightening or encouraging to others, but it is not the whole story of the followers of Jesus, and we can learn and grow from discovering more of what God is doing elsewhere.

In the one flock of Jesus there is no room for factions, for in-fighting, for one-upman-ship. In the flock of Jesus none of us should think that we know it all and be unwilling to learn when someone else can explain something to us that opens up the world of our faith in new ways. In the flock of Jesus we should encourage all to play to their strengths and go forward with the gospel, even as the church at Ephesus sent Apollos on his way with their blessing, so that he was enriched from his time with them, and better able to serve God.

There is one flock, one shepherd. But it’s a very big flock and within it, there is a lot going on.