

Acts 20:17-38

I am sorry to bore you with my garden again but last Sunday afternoon I was out in the front garden with my grandson Caleb when I saw a little oak tree in the grass. I immediately pulled it up complete with acorn and binned it.

Later that afternoon I regretted binning it as I was due in the evening to preach at Trinity and thought a small oak tree would be a good illustration and I had binned it. However I needn't have worried because a quick trip into the back garden and in 30 seconds I had five more!

Growth – that's what we are thinking about over these summer weeks, the spread of God's kingdom and the growth of the church.

If you remember a couple of weeks back as we looked at the events in Lystra on the first missionary journey we saw something of the methods Paul used to see the spread of the Kingdom of God, how he moved from place to place, preaching the word and seeing people come to faith. Then he went back strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith and also appointing elders in each church.

For Paul church growth was not just about seeing people come to faith but providing them with support systems so that they might continue in the faith.

The third missionary journey had that element of strengthening the Christians as we read in Acts 18:23, "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples."

This was the beginning of a long journey. It took Paul across Turkey from east to west. Then north to Troas and again across to Macedonia and probably down through Thessalonica to Corinth before making the return journey to Troas from there they sailed down the coast via Samos to Miletus and it was from there that Paul called the elders from the church in Ephesus to come and meet with him, (Acts 20:17). It was in effect a farewell speech as we see in v25. Paul v22 was being compelled towards Jerusalem, even as Jesus had been, knowing that prison awaited him.

His onward journey from Miletus would take him via Rhodes and Patara to Tyre and on to Jerusalem – so we have the whole of his third journey there in front of us.

Before he went to Jerusalem, however, he wanted to speak to these elders from the church in Ephesus.

Who were they? If we look at v28 we see Paul describing them as shepherds looking after the flock and as overseers. I don't want to spend time breaking down each term because clearly Paul saw them as interchangeable and later we can see from what he was calling them to do the role that he saw them having.

What I do want to say here was that he was speaking to people who were involved in leadership in the church, as such they had a role of care, to shepherd or oversee and that there was more than one of them.

If we want to put it in Christ Church language he could have been talking to the church Council, the Co-ordinators, the team leading our children's work, or leading the Fellowship group or the homegroup leaders. In other words he was not thinking about clergy and he was certainly not thinking about one man bands!

Now if you think these roles don't include you then do follow with me because I hope it might help us see the kind of ministry we should be looking for here in Christ Church and also explain perhaps some of the things that happen here at Christ Church.

As Paul spoke to these church leaders he reminded them of his ministry and called them to an effective ministry.

1. A ministry in action

In order to encourage them in their ministry Paul pointed them to his own. Look with me at the passage, v18 "you know how I lived", v20 "you know that I have not hesitated to preach," v34 "you yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs". They knew how he had ministered and he wanted them to learn from the way he did his ministry.

Over the years I have been privileged to have with me many people who were preparing for ordination as well as Curates who had been ordained.

Much of the time has been them watching what I do and talking with me about it. They have been able to see me at work and to reflect with me on it. Here Paul was saying to these elders, look you have seen me at work now go and do it.

Can I just highlight what I think are four important aspects of ministry from what I see here and also wider in what we read about Paul.

a. People – Paul pointed them to the way he lived and the words he used speak of the way he related to people. So in v19 I served, v35 of hard work and helping. Paul was focused on people, on those he sought to bring to faith but also on those who had come to faith and who he sought to strengthen. That was why even though he was going to Jerusalem he took time out to call this meeting. It is shown in the way he mentored Timothy and Titus and wrote to them. People were key and time had to be made for them. I do try, sometimes unsuccessfully, to make time for people. I hate it when people say that they would like to see me and then add "but I know you are busy". I do often reply "no I am not busy I have all the time in the world" which when people are involved I think is what it should be and why so much time was given recently for the one to one sessions we

ran. Please if you want to see me I have time because it is not people who are important, it is you who is important.

b. Preaching – when I am asked what on earth I do during the week I often mention preparing to preach and when people ask how long it takes to prepare a sermon say something like 8-10 hours. However, I don't know because I never time it and once I have started the sermon is in my head for days and so when I am walking or driving I can be thinking about it. Here Paul shows the importance to him of preaching. So v21, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance". There had been what we might call evangelistic preaching aimed at those who were not Christians. But also, v20, "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you". He had been building up the faith of new Christians and as such v27, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." Paul had tried to be systematic and thorough in his teaching. Some time back I was talking at a small meeting of Christians. As ever I was opening a Bible passage. At the end I was asked if we had Bible study groups in our church. Then as the conversation went on I described how we have sermon series to which one person replied, "that would be good for us because with a different preacher each week we can get the same thing like the prodigal son over and over again." Those words have stuck with me, in part because I feel sad for those Christians but also as a reminder of the importance of trying to preach the whole counsel of God. So when in a couple of weeks time we start a series on Malachi it won't be because Malachi is my favourite book but because, taking a wider view, I think it is part of the counsel of God's will which we need to hear. However not it was not just public preaching Paul did, v20 but he went "from house to house". The concern for people meant he taught people in small groups and one to one. In this way he sought to build them and to protect them from error and that leads me to

c. protect – when I was ordained priest one of the questions I was asked was "Will you be ready with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word?" I am sorry to say that next summer when Gordon is ordained priest he won't be asked that question. Paul knew as he says in v29-30 that there would come those, even from within the church, who would distort the truth and so the importance of teaching the whole counsel of God not just for the sake of the truth but to protect. Paul saw it as vital to protect these young Christians from false teachers.

d. persevere – as we have seen none of this had been easy for Paul v19 he had been severely tested and v31 for three years he had not stopped warning them with tears. In all his aim v24 was to finish the race that is to complete the task God had called him to and for that he had to rely on the power of God. I am not of the school that believes that if you take on a role in the church you are in it till you die. However I am of the school that believes that as Christians we should be continually serving

in some way and that we should be continuing to grow in the faith. Paul carried on the ministry God had called him to, he persevered even though it was often painful. We in the ministry God has called us to are to persevere, to finish the race and complete the task. What is it that you are doing and perhaps tiring of? Is God now saying through this passage persevere?

People and preaching were key elements of Paul's ministry along of course with prayer. Through these he sought to build and protect those who had come to faith and despite much opposition he persevered in this ministry.

Friends that is what we should be looking for in Ministers. That is what we should be encouraging in Christ Church and the wider church. People, preaching prayer are Paul's ways to see the church grow and they still are the way the church grows.

But then and more briefly Paul called these elders to minister

2. The call to ministry

Again I think that many of us here can see these things speaking into the areas where we are serving in our church.

What Paul called to these elders to is in vs28-32.

a. watch yourselves – their first concern must be for their own spiritual well being. They cannot care for the flock if they are not caring for themselves. This is a word for all of us. And was central to the Lifeshape studies we did which were aimed at helping us review our spiritual lives and continuing to move on with God. These elders and we must take care of ourselves.

b. be shepherds – it is a great image that runs through the whole of Scripture with Jesus as the good shepherd. But note how precious is that which was entrusted to their care, v28 "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." They were caring for those whom Christ had died for. Is that how you see the child in the Lightcatchers group you are helping with, or the person in your homegroup, or the friend at Fellowship group or the person sitting over the other side of the church, I say that because I know we care for the person sitting next to us! We mentioned earlier how Paul strengthened and encouraged the new Christians and when we looked at this a couple of weeks ago I asked who we were helping in this way and I ask it again here. Again from Lifeshapes and week four the square we are all sheep who need to be led and helped but we are also all shepherds who can help others in the faith. Yes to those of us in roles like myself or Gordon or the church wardens or Council this has a wider meaning but to all of us it has something to say if we will hear it and obey it.

c. Be on your guard, v31. Why – because there are those even within the church who will try and lead us astray. The devil is at work to prevent the spread of the church and he does it by turning the church away from the truth because he is the father of all lies. In effect Paul was saying look just

because someone wears a dog collar and is a very nice person it doesn't mean they are speaking God's truth! This is why in v32 Paul said "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified". They and we need to stay close to God through his word if we are to run the race and complete the task.

Paul knew the church was not growing because of him alone. He was in it not just with Barnabas and Silas but with countless others who had come to faith and though still quite young in their faith were eager to help others along that path of faith.

The key elements were people preaching and prayer for Paul, for these elders and for us and as we do that we need to watch over ourselves, to be shepherds caring for others and to be on our guard to defend and hold to the truth.

In all this we trust to God to see his church grow.