

Sermon at Christ Well on 17 March 19: Acts 19.23 – 41 (23 – 27, 28 – 34, 35 – 41)

Some voices need to be heard this evening. The insistent voice of Demetrius, a silversmith in Ephesus. The more measured voice of the unnamed city clerk in the same place. A silence needs to be acknowledged this evening. The uncharacteristic silence of Paul in the reading. His influence is felt throughout the reading, but the active role that he plays is quite small.

I love this story of lively events in Ephesus. Then, as now, towns and cities were melting pots – turbulent, complex, all manner of characters, motives and conflicting interests. As with Ephesus, so with Swansea now. We noted two weeks ago that the noise of industry has been replaced by the bustle of students, but this is a very varied place.

There is a lot of noise in this passage. Phrase after phrase highlights human voices raised: v.23 ‘...there arose a great disturbance’; v.28 ‘...they were furious and began shouting’; v.29 ‘...the whole city was in uproar’; v.32 – a truly wonderful and contemporary verse – ‘The assembly was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most people did not even know why they were there’.

How many events have you witnessed, of which this is an accurate description? This is a story of noise, of union officials and local government bigwigs and city dwellers manipulated; maybe it takes you back to your own workplace; this is a story of Christian leaders seeking to maintain a position of integrity...the preservation of the prophetic voice. It highlights the timeless imperfections of cities, and has much to say about the role of Christians in such settings. It offers a word to those who would minister in 21st century cities – and a clear challenge to those Christian communities, churches, in which their work is rooted.

This evening, we meet Demetrius and the silversmiths: craftsmen – businessmen. We know what is going on here, what the trouble was – their pockets were being touched. Demetrius was an eloquent and persuasive speaker. The silversmiths declare that they were jealous for the honour of the so-called goddess Artemis, but the reality is that they were far more worried about their incomes. When pilgrims came to Ephesus, they liked to take home a souvenir, and the silversmiths made model shrines which they

bought and sold as such souvenirs. Money talks – even when, perhaps especially when the money is linked with religion. Christianity was making such strides that their trade was threatened – and so we encounter a clear case of what happened and what still happens when Christianity comes up against a vested interest.

Yes, we might well handle a situation similar to this rather differently today, but a timeless Christian principle remains: there are occasions when the gospel demands that we speak out against the vested interests of the city...whatever those might be in our age. Christians sometimes struggle to know how to engage with current politics, when so much of it seems angry, aggressive, confrontational; the debate on so-called ‘Big Society’ limps on...just: cutbacks continue to threaten the most vulnerable, justice is at the heart of the Jesus-language and we fear the alienation of potential volunteers, even though loving service is at the heart of the Jesus-way. We treasure the tradition of the prophetic voice, but we are called to be positive; affirmation rather than antagonism lies at the heart of our faith.

Every city church, every city minister has a non-negotiable responsibility to engage with the city, seeking to articulate the authentic voice of Jesus. Herein is harvest discerned. In these times, that is relentlessly challenging...which points to informed prayer and discernment at the heart of every Christian community. Demetrius and his friends acted out of mixed motives; we need to be as clear as possible about our own motives. There are times when we need to speak out for the Christian faith and against worldly vested interests: on what specific issues does the clarion call of this church go out? A new community minister may help us to rediscover our voice, but we do not have the luxury of remaining silent.

Demetrius is one significant person in this passage. The so-called city clerk is another – the key local government official. His was a very important public office. He kept the public records; he introduced business to the city’s assembly; correspondence in Ephesus was addressed to him. He was a powerful man and, perfectly understandably, he was worried about the possibility of a riot. Again, a familiar ring... August 2011 is not that far away; I had to return from a youth camp in Shropshire to pick up the reigns in Carrs Lane, when rioting occurred, since you could see the damaged doors at M&S from the building.. In the main, Rome was kindly at this time, but one thing that Rome would not tolerate was any kind of civil

disorder. Riot unchecked – and the magistrate deemed responsible would lose their position. Imperfect cities.

The voice of the clerk is an interesting voice. You can argue that he defends Paul and his colleagues. Yes, he sings the praises of Artemis, but reminds the agitators that Paul has not robbed temples or blasphemed the goddess; if there is a case to answer, then it must be pursued in the courts, settled in a legal assembly; a riot must not occur, because no reasonable, no defensible explanation for it could be given. What a smooth operator! The timeless gift of the gab of the professional politician. Yes, he does speak up for Paul, but that is no indication of genuine strength of feeling for him. Yet again, this is somebody who played his part in self-interest. He saved Paul and his companions, but he saved them because he was saving his own skin; a complex character – should we like or dislike him, heed or spurn him?

When Jesus sent out his disciples in Matthew Chapter 10, he urged them to be, ‘shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves’. Not everybody likes this saying, but I think that I can understand what Jesus was saying: we are not to be contaminated, compromised, sucked in by the world, but... well, we do have to understand what is going on in the world. Especially here. Especially now. It is no use acquiring a reputation for being naïve or gullible, somehow detached from the messiness of the world which cries out for Christian love and Christian truth; it is no use retreating to fortress-church, drawbridge firmly in place to keep the world at bay. We have to understand what makes people tick, how decisions are made, how systems work, why communities are unsettled, what injustices cry out in a state of irresolution: priorities for minister – priorities for church. We are not to act in worldly self-interest – as did Demetrius, as did the city clerk – but we do have to understand something of the way in which things happen in the world. Minister and church together embody Christ in the world, not detach him from it; an incarnational model of church necessarily leads to an informed people. And the times when we struggle to find the right words, fear that our discernment is shaky...well, Jesus assures us that the Spirit will find a way to speak through us.

Demetrius, the clerk – and finally, briefly, significantly, Paul. There is little by way of direct encounter with Paul in this passage, but what there is, is entirely characteristic. ‘Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the

theatre'. A characteristic touch: Paul wished to face the mob, but they would not let him. It never struck Paul not to face them, for Paul was a man without fear. For the silversmiths and the town clerk, it was always safety first; for Paul, it was safety last. As ever, there are tensions in Paul, lessons from Paul: bravery is fine – and courage is a quality much-needed in ministry today – but even in faith, there are times when discretion is the better part of valour. Sometimes we do have to take an unequivocal stand...but always we need to listen to each other, so that we act with a measure of wisdom.

I started by saying that I like this passage: it has a very contemporary feel – cities as complex, imperfect places. As believers in such busy places, we strive to act without too much self-interest – and we acknowledge that it takes wisdom and discretion, if truly we are to be effective as those who embody Jesus in these days. Look and listen; pray with passion; preach as prophet – serve with love. City harvest. Amen.