

The Way, the Mob and the Rescue

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- [0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 19, verses 23 to 41, the way, the mob, and the rescue. The way, the mob, and the rescue. The book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, and so the Gospel of Luke has told us how the Lord Jesus was born into this world, lived, preached, healed, helped, ministered. Amen, he was condemned to death, he died, he was buried, amen, gloriously rose from the dead, showed himself to his disciples, left them the Great Commission, and then having completed his earthly mission, returned to his father in glory. The book of Acts is about what happened next, how that ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ continued after he ascended to the right hand of his father in heaven. He sent, as he promised, he sent his Holy Spirit onto his disciples, and at his command they were witnesses of the risen Jesus in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The Word of God increased as they preached that word, it grew, and it bore fruit, and that fruit was in the large numbers of people across the world who sometimes thousands at a time believed and joined the Christian church. Now over recent weeks at St. Columbus we've been looking at different turning points along the way as the Gospel spread, as the witness to Jesus was given across that the world and the Word increased. So one of the things that we looked at was how for the first time someone who wasn't Jewish and wasn't a proselyte to the Jewish religion, who hadn't received circumcision, who hadn't become a Jew, Cornelius and all of his household came to faith and believed and were baptized as Christians.
- We've also looked at how the Gospel came to Athens, the place where all the great thinkers gave their ideas and how there was a clash between the Gospel message and the understandings of that time. And today we're looking at how the Gospel clashes with traditional culture and belief.
- There's a saying in Russian which goes like this, a holy place will never remain empty. And when we bring the Gospel to an individual and when we bring the Gospel to a culture or a people, we're never bringing it to an empty place. We're never bringing it to someone who doesn't believe anything or do anything or practice anything. We're always bringing that Gospel to a holy place which is already occupied. There's always something there already. There are beliefs, there are practices, there are customs, there are tradition, there's history, there's heritage. And so when the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes into the life of that individual or to the life of that people or culture, there's a clash with what I shall call vested interests, what's already there.

And there's plenty of examples throughout history about how that has happened and sometimes it's taken a very long time for the Gospel to actually penetrate through into a culture. Sometimes Christians have thought it's impossible, that we'll never get through. And there are missionaries who went to places such as Africa or China and saw very, very little fruit. But now we can see that in these places at least the Gospel is bearing fruit. And so this is an example from the Bible, from the very, very start of the Christian church about how this clash between the Gospel and these vested interests took place. And I want to consider it first of all under three headings, the way, the mob and the rescue. Now Ephesus was a success story. Ephesus was a place where the Gospel was successful. It all began rather inauspiciously with this maverick preacher called Apollos. Now it seems that he was a great speaker, he was a charismatic personality and the only problem was he was a little bit off message. He was basically telling people the message of John the Baptist along the lines of repent and get ready for the kingdom. So he knew about Jesus but only as an expectation and he didn't know that the Holy Spirit had been given. So the Ephesian church actually begins with Paul bringing these Old Testament believers into the New Testament. They receive the Holy Spirit and they're baptized. And so that's the beginning. Twelve disciples brought into the New Testament. The next stop was the synagogue. That was Paul's custom and he argued from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Christ. He did so for three months. Twelve

[5 : 21] Sabbaths or however many Sabbaths he would have gone into the synagogue and discussed and debated. And eventually the next stage is that the Christian disciples leave the synagogue and begin holding meetings in a hall. And this lasted for two years and the result Luke tells us was that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Asia's the area around Ephesus. So you can imagine people might have come in for the market or they might have heard from someone else but the result was that this particular part of the Roman Empire was reached with the Gospel. And during this time as well as the teaching of Paul there were amazing miracles healing from sickness and deliverance from demonic oppression. And many believers leaving their occult past took the literature that they found unhelpful and was damaging for their spiritual life. And at great personal cost they got rid of it and Luke describes that event. Notice how in this passage the Gospel or the Christian church is described in an unusual way. It's described as the way. Now often in the

Old Testament the way refers to the path of faith, obedience, salvation. Jesus had said I am the way, the truth and the life. But I want to particularly focus on connecting this phrase the way with what it says in verse 26. This Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people. The words turned away describe people changing direction and taking a different path. And in Ephesus the issue was that there were so many people taking this different Christian path. It was about numbers.

A great many people were walking in this new Christian way. So the first thing is the way, the success of the Gospel in Ephesus. The second thing is the mob because not everyone was so pleased about the success of the Gospel in Ephesus. And in particular a group of craftsmen led by someone called Demetrius. First of all he and his colleagues made their living by manufacturing works of religious art and veneration, the silver shrines of Artemis. And they didn't want to lose their livelihood. But for them it wasn't just about their own self-interest or at least that was their story. Verse 27, but also that the temple of the great Artemis may be counted as nothing and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship. It wasn't just about lost livelihood. It was about lost greatness. The lost greatness of the goddess, the lost greatness of her image, her temple and her city. That was what it was about for these craftsmen. Artemis, Latin Diana, was the goddess of hunting, the forest, moon, archery and often these goddesses would have all sorts of different overlapping responsibilities if you like.

Paradoxically also she became a representative both of virginity and of childbirth. Her temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. You can imagine the Acropolis in Athens that you'll remember. It looked something like that. And here's a quote from someone contemporary describing seeing this temple in Ephesus. I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus and the hanging gardens and the colossus of the sun and the huge labor of the high pyramids and the vast tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds those other marvels lost their brilliancy and I said, low apart from Olympus the sun never looked on ought so grand.

The craftsmen were concerned that this temple would end up empty, lose its greatness and its prestige and it was all Paul's fault. It was also a rock that had fallen from the sky and was alleged to represent some of the attributes of this goddess. Compare verses 10 and 26 and 27 just to get what their concerns were. Verse 10 is earlier than the chapter that we read. It's just describing Paul's ministry. This continued for two years so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord both Jews and Greeks. Verse 26. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people saying that God's made with hands are not God's. And then verse 27. And there is a danger not only that this trade of ours may come into dispute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing and that she may even be disposed from her magnificence. She whom all Asia and the world worship. I want to draw your attention just to this phrase all Asia. This is about people. This is about popularity. This is about what Russians would call rating. The popularity of the church, the Christian gospel and the popularity of the cult of Artemis. That's where this conflict is happening. Paul is drawing people away from the cult of Artemis. And so the craftsmen initiate this disturbance. They begin shouting and their indignation spreads. Soon the whole city is up in arms and they rush together to the city theater. I think we might call it stadium just to get an idea of the size of it. Dragging culprits with them. Paul's companions Gaius and Aristarchus are hauled before the mob. Alexander may actually not have been a Christian. Maybe he was simply a representative of the synagogue. But his attempt to give a defense is shouted down. And at one stage for two whole hours the whole stadium is just shouting this slogan. Great is Artemis of the

[12:10] Ephesians. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. All a bit fraught. Now if this modern day, sorry if this disturbance in the first century seems quite distant. How might this be expressed in our own time? There's a Russian phrase that you might recognize. A talk show. And it's a particular common thing on television in Britain and in Russia and other countries where a way of shaping public opinion is to have a discussion led by the presenter. Various people are involved. Usually there's the pseudo expert. Usually there's a distraught mother at some point involved in this discussion. And then particular individuals are introduced as hate figures expressing the views that should be vilified and rejected. This is the modern day mob, the disturbances we might experience in our own life. And in this sort of atmosphere of course the gospel is blocked by the noise of chanting and shouting whether it's in a stadium or whether it's on a contemporary talk show. So the second thing is the mob. The way, the success of the gospel and the mob is the way in which the gospel is blocked out by this noise. And so the third part of this situation is the rescue. How is the situation diffused? What a key figure in this is the town clerk. He seems to be the one who was able to quieten down this huge crowd and talk down the mob. He starts actually by reaffirming all of the beliefs of the crowd. He reaffirms the goddess Artemis, the sacred stone and Ephesus as the guardian city of her cult. He's actually not challenging what they believe. But he does appeal first of all to the Christians circumspectured. How careful Christians were in that situation as they brought the gospel to that culture. He says the Christians are neither sacrilegious or blasphemous of our goddess. And I imagine that he would have been right. The

Christians would have been very careful as they preach the gospel, not to be unnecessarily inflammatory, not to offend sensitivities, not to say things that would be unhelpful. The Christians had been tolerant and respectful. And that went in their favor. The town clerk also appeals to the law. He says that there are legal challenges that can be used, legal channels that can be used, if indeed there is any case to be made against the Christians. Otherwise there was a risk that the residents of Ephesus would be charged with public disorder. Now as I read these verses, a lot of it seems very familiar to the situation in which we live. It's all too easy to offend religious sensitivities and national pride. It's all too easy to be on the receiving end of the sort of aggression that we can see in this passage. And in this situation it's very important to be able to, not only to think about what we're saying, but how we're saying it, to be able to see good in the surrounding culture and to use it as a platform for talking about the gospel. And it's also very important for Christians to enjoy the protection which God gives through the law. That's a theme throughout the book of Acts, that the Christian church was not opposed to the Roman Empire and wasn't opposed to the legal order that was in place. And in many occasions the Roman Empire came to the rescue of the church against the sort of mob rule that we see here. And so when he said these things he dismissed the assembly, the way, the mob and the rescue, the way in which that situation was resolved. Now let's think about this a little bit more. What is this all about? It's all about how the gospel will clash with whatever is already there, that these vested interests. Now some of these vested interests are pretty self-serving. The money to be made from servicing anything from religious observance to outright sin. I remember when we visited Turkey I had an opportunity to travel to Jerusalem just for 24 hours on the plane. And so all of the tourists in Jerusalem with me were Russians and so the tour guide who was Turkish knew his audience. And he said, when you're in

Turkey you'll have plenty of opportunity to buy some brilliant fur coats that will be useful for you in Russia. But why instead of that why don't you buy one of these icons? That will be much better for your health and it will bless your whole family. An icon is something that's bought to bless you your whole life through. And he was selling these items of religious observance and obviously there was a certain self-serving aspect to that. There are more blatant examples, casinos, massage parlours, adult internet content, multinational companies supplying anything from cigarettes to alcohol. All of these can be vested interests that are threatened by the gospel. I think it was C.S. Lewis who said, a man with an addiction has low sales resistance. So there can be self-serving vested interests. There can also be religious indignation. A particular culture has a set of plausibility structures, things that make sense and are obvious to them even though an outsider might just be bemused by these beliefs. But in Ephesus it was Artemis, it was her temple, it was the sacred stone that fell from the sky. All of these were self-evident to those who believed them. This goddess must be given the Jew veneration she deserves and a great many people were being persuaded to withhold their worship from her diverting it to another God.

And related to this there can be a strong sense of local identity and pride. That's also a vested interest. This was Artemis of the Ephesians, of the Ephesians. Although she was venerated in other cities this was an instance of national pride, of national identity. Not to worship her is in some way disrespectful to the city of Ephesus. It's to be less than patriotic. And all of this is summed up in this slogan that they were chanting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians. There can be many examples of this sort of phenomenon of these vested interests blocking the Gospel. And sometimes they can even be apparently Christian. So how does the Gospel actually threaten and challenge these vested interests? Now our passage doesn't say an awful lot but look at verse 26. These are the words presumably of Paul or possibly a paraphrase of what Paul said. Gods made with hands are not gods. Gods made with hands are not gods. Now this ties into for example what it says in 1 Thessalonians, the summary of the Gospel in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10. You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. That's Paul's summary of his Gospel to a particular audience in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10. And so the Gospel isn't actually about our spiritual search or our expression of our religious devotion. It isn't about tradition and heritage, culture and history. All of these things do have their value and place but it's important to recognize that they are subject to God's Word. And whether we physically fashion an idol or we imagine the object of our worship to be what we feel he or she or it should be, whether we do either of these things, these are not gods. These are not gods. They come from inside our own imagination. And in the midst of all this, the Gospel is about the true and living

God and about his Son Jesus. The Gospel calls us to turn and to wait. The Gospel is about the real God, the Creator of the universe, the one to whom we are answerable, the source of all moral values and meaning, the one who alone is worthy to be the object of our worship. And the only way we can know God is by his Word, by revelation, by him revealing himself to us and by us accepting that revelation. And that will cut across our existing values and beliefs, whether they're personal to us or whether they're part of our national, historical and cultural heritage. There's much that can be reaffirmed. There are many good things in our cultures but there will be aspects of our history and our heritage, our beliefs, our practices, our traditions, our customs that will be at odds with God's revelation. Gods made with hands are not gods. So what does all this mean in practice? I'd like to draw three implications, applications for us, commands. And the first of these is simply that we would recognize that there's going to be a clash, there's going to be a confrontation, that the encounter between us and God's Word is going to involve us accepting and submitting and repenting and changing and turning both for us and for those to whom we bring the gospel. It will at times come down to a choice to cling to the greatness of handmade gods or to embrace the way. We will in one way or another face that choice. Secondly, the second implication, and without denying the first point, is that there are always ways and means of showing respect and tolerance and avoiding unnecessary offence. It was Paul's friends in the government who prevented him from addressing the mob in the stadium. The Christians had avoided sacrilege and blasphemy. And also if we look at what the craftsmen say about Paul's evangelistic technique, how is it that Paul got people into the church? And it says that Paul persuaded. And in that word is the use of truth, the avoidance of subterfuge or trying to whip up a crowd or gather people into the church using all sorts of techniques. Paul simply persuaded. He was confident that the truth would be able to win over the hearts and minds of people. And so the second application from this passage is for us to always be thinking, how is it I can show more respect? How is it I can show more recognition of what is already there whilst recognizing that the gospel will clash with these vested interests? And thirdly, there is also legal recourse. Sometimes it will involve actively Christians standing up for their rights and being willing to do so also through courts of law. But also it's about enjoying the legal protection that we're given by God through the state, even through those who are not Christians. The town clerk appealing to common sense and the rule of law. These are ways in which God shows his vengeance and uses his defense, even when the church is defenseless. So the way, the mob and the rescue, the gospel, God's word, his revelation will clash with our preconceived ideas and in part with our religious and cultural heritage. It is inevitable. God's made with hands are not God's. But God's word can get through.

[25 : 01] It did get through in Ephesus. This situation was resolved. And what it requires of us is for us to recognize the authority of his word, to be respectful and persuasive and to use the legal protection that God provides for his people. When he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. Amen. Let's pray together. Our Father, we give you thanks for the Lord Jesus Christ. We give you thanks for the gospel and we give you thanks for the spread of the gospel that we see beginning in the book of Acts and continuing to our day. Lord, we thank you for the fact that the gospel has won our hearts and whether it was through our parents or whether it was through a Christian friend or however it was that you brought that gospel to us and we were able to accept it, that you have done that in our lives and we've been able to start on this way to follow your

Son in this world. Lord, we pray that as the gospel encounters the sort of clash that we see in this passage that you would help us to be, find guidance from your word, to find confidence in your word. We thank you for the resolution of this situation here and many times throughout history how these clashes have not been the end of the road for the Christian church. We pray for your protection for churches across the world that face opposition similar to what's described in this passage. We pray for ourselves as Christians to recognize the reality of this clash and not to be overawed by that and to accept it. We pray that you would teach us to be respectful and tolerant and persuasive and we pray that we would enjoy that protection that you provide and you also provide through the legal institutions and the state. We thank you for all these things and we pray for the progress of the gospel in our day in Jesus' name. Amen.