

Recap Summer 2014

This summer we've been on a bit of a tour of the early Christian Church. Through the various meditations and services that MFMs have prepared, we've visited Antioch; Philippi; Ephesus; Corinth; Rome; Thessalonica; Colossae; and, finally, a quick tour of Jerusalem.

Apart from the Sundays that followed the Leader magazine theme, we also had a meditation from Marjorie Steinman on "the languages of love".

I think it's been an interesting experiment, and I'm only sorry that I missed three Sundays this summer because of vacation time. I enjoyed the Sundays that I was able to be present for, and I've enjoyed reading the meditations that I wasn't able to hear being presented live. (And a reminder to everyone that most of the meditations that are presented at MFM are available in our Meditations Archive, available through the MFM calendar on our website).

The whole point of this exercise was to "visit", and learn from, the early churches that are addressed at various times in the New Testament. The Leader magazine describes the theme this way :

"Through the book of Acts and Paul's letters we get a glimpse of real churches that Paul plants, visits, instructs, and encourages. We learn of the successes and failures of these early Christian congregations—and we are reminded of the successes and failures of our own congregations. God worked through the imperfect early churches, and God is working in our imperfect churches now!"

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Let's bring that statement a little closer to home : "God worked through the imperfect people of the early churches, and God is working through us, imperfect as we are!"

Is it arrogant to think, or hope, that God is somehow working through us, with all of our faults and flaws? How can we even know that this, or that, event or incident is evidence that God is at work?

I think part of the answer to that question is that it's not really about *knowing* without a doubt that such and such an episode is proof that God is at work. It's

more about being open to the presence of God, rather than in being able to prove to others that God is there.

If I'm depressed, for example, with dark thoughts of suicide, and some anonymous stranger smiles at me in just the right way, at just the right time, I might see God's hand at work, bringing new hope into my life.

The anonymous stranger probably won't see himself or herself as an instrument of God. He or she may, in fact, be oblivious to the fact that a smile was on his or her lips. But I can remain convinced, all the same, that God has just reached out to me through this person.

And, curiously enough, that person doesn't have to be a Christian for me to believe that God is at work through him or her.

If I look about me today, I can't really say with anything approaching authority that *there* is the hand of God at work, though I may have very clear opinions in this regard. I have *my* understanding of God, and I see things through this lens.

If I were living in 16th century Europe, for example, my understanding of what was happening would have been very much coloured by how I understood God's presence in the world.

If I were a Catholic, I might well think that the world had gone mad. Reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Knox were destroying the church, from my perspective. Henry VIII in England was rejecting the authority of the Pope over the church in England while pursuing a political agenda meant to facilitate his own fruitless search for a male heir, going through one wife after another.

If I were a Lutheran or a Calvinist, I would have seen the Anabaptists as a dangerous and reckless pack of radicals who threatened the order and stability of this new reformation church. I might well have participated in hunting them down and putting them to death because of the threat they posed to this new way of being church.

And, of course, if I were an Anabaptist, I would have looked to God for protection and assurance that *I* was the one who had it right. I would see God's hand in the lives that were saved, but I would also, paradoxically, see God's hand in the deaths of the martyrs who refused to abandon their faith in the face of harsh persecution.

Now, some four or five centuries later, most Christians might be able to look back at the Reformation and see some sign of God's hand throughout it all. We might wish that this or that player had acted differently; we might wish that more compassion, or love, or simple understanding had been shown by everyone concerned; but we might nonetheless be able to pick out some measure of assurance that God was, indeed, at work here and there, in spite of the horrors of the time.

At the time, though, I suspect recognizing God's hand would have been more difficult. We sometimes need the passage of time to allow us to see things more clearly.

And so, this summer, we took that trip back to see how God was at work in the early church, in the hope that their experience can, in some way, inform our experience.

At the beginning of the summer I suggested that we needed to be careful about how we 'read' that experience. I suggested that the church of the early years was a volatile place, with problems of its own. I suggested that we shouldn't be afraid to look at the early church through the lens of two thousand years of history that might help us put things into perspective.

It makes me think of the opening line of an old novel by the title of "The Go-Between". The book starts with this sentence : "The past is a foreign country : they do things differently there."

So ... as we've visited this 'foreign country' over the last couple of months, I thought we could round out our summer by taking a few minutes to share some of the snapshots of our visit. The shots were taken by the various speakers, so reflect what they found of interest in the town they visited.

But the choice of the snapshots also reflects what struck me about this place, or these places. My choice of highlights might not coincide with the respective speakers' sense of what was most important, or your choice of the highlights of the summer, so when we get to our sharing time I'd invite you to share with the rest of us what you took away from some part of the meditations, or other component of the worship services.

And please bear in mind that what I'm about to share is a series of snapshots of the summer. I know I can't do justice to the messages that were brought. I'm not going

to try to run a video of the summer services. I've cherry-picked a few thoughts from the meditations that got my mind working, and I hope they at least capture some of the substance of the meditations.

We started off in Antioch, with Dora-Marie.

The focus statement from the Leader magazine for that Sunday was: "Diversity in the church is a great joy when people contribute their various gifts to the body. It is an even greater joy when that body reaches out to others in generosity."

One of the very first things Dora-Marie mentioned about Antioch is a little tidbit that might seem like a trivial piece of information. She stated that

"... Christopher Lougheed told me that the city had street lights in 100 A.D. ..."

I found that particularly interesting given that there is no mention of street lighting in Scotland until the late 17th century, and in England, London didn't get formal street lighting until the early 15th century. I think I found that intriguing because I suspect that those of us of northern European extraction tend to forget, or conveniently ignore, the fact that while these early church people were wandering under street lights, communicating with each other by letter, and travelling about the Mediterranean basin rubbing shoulders with people from many different walks of life, we were still running about painting ourselves blue and stealing each others' cattle.

In the case of we Scots, we were such a wild bunch that the Romans built a wall to keep us out, rather than wasting their time trying to civilize us. While we were dancing around naked in the moonlight, putting clan and family before all else, this group in Antioch is already struggling with questions of inclusiveness, tolerance, and the respect of others genuinely seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Part of Dora-Marie's take on this church was to wonder :

"... who are we opening ourselves for today? Who, by their inclusion in our community of faith, is changing our identity, and are we willing to let them? ..."

In terms of leadership, Dora-Marie also offered the following observation :

“... I would suggest that at MFM ... We are still feeling our way forward as a community ...”, and she asked the question “...how can we determine if where we are going is indeed the will of God?”

She did offer a bit of an answer to her own question :

“... Where the fruits of the spirit live, that is the direction God calls us in. Are there enmities? Is there strife, anger, quarrels, and factions? If so, we may be missing the mark. On the other hand, is their patience and kindness? Is there generosity and self-control? Is there joy and love? If so, then we can trust that we are on the right track ...”

The next stop on our tour of the early church brought us to Jerusalem. I looked at the letter of James as a guide to what seemed to be important to this group of Christians, and I tried to sift out some of the principles that anchored their life.

I really do love the book of James. It sets a lot of very high standards for behaviour, but, at the same time, it's not done in an overly abstract, other-worldly, kind of way. James' encouragements seem very grounded in human reality.

He echoes the Old Testament prophets' concern for the poor and the vulnerable, for example.

He strikes at the tendency to show favouritism of the rich over the poor, as though being wealthy somehow made one more worthy of respect than being a simple working person.

He famously asks “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

There is no complicated theology here; no creed to be believed; just a simple recognition that God expects us to take care of each other.

Finally, from James, the encouragement to “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”

After leaving Jerusalem, we visited Rome, with Dora Koop.

The focus statement for that Sunday was “Christians will not always agree, but if disagreeing people start with the premise that other believers who hold opposing views do so because they are convinced that they are honoring God, we can still be church with one another.”

Since Dora has visited Rome a few times, she gave us a bit of a taste of what the city feels like today, and underscored the continued Christian presence in this city that has been so central to the development of Christianity in Europe, and, from there, throughout the rest of the world. She even got a chance to meet the Pope while she was there ... along with 10,000 other people.

She informed us that the church in Rome was likely founded by the visitors from Rome who had been present at Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts. So it, too, is very much a Jewish church at its inception. But, the Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome in AD 49, leaving only the Gentile Christians, who do not share the (formerly majority) Jewish Christian concerns about foods, circumcision, and Jewish holy days. When the Jewish believers finally return they're horrified by what they find.

And this, of course, leads to conflict in the group.

The Romans text used for that Sunday addresses this situation. **Paul tells the Romans to start with the premise that other believers who hold opposing views do so because they are convinced that they are honoring God.** Their spirituality shouldn't be called into question. It should be assumed that they are legitimately trying to live out their faith in a responsible way.

Dora then put the question to us : **How can adopting this premise (that people who disagree with us are seeking God's honor in their actions) change how we enter into discernment in our churches?**

She further nuanced the question by asking : “... **what do we have in common with other Christians and what can we focus on ...?**”

She then partly answered her question by focusing on Jesus, and examining what we mean by faith in Jesus and faith in God. Not what is right or wrong about our beliefs, but simply what do we believe, and accepting that that might differ from what others conscientiously believe.

We might tell our own stories of our experience of God in our lives, and open ourselves to hearing other stories of how God is at work in the lives of others. And, in so doing, open ourselves to better understanding God.

Leaving Rome, we moved on to Philippi.

The focus statement for this Sunday was :

“Receiving the generosity of the gospel with an open heart allows us to respond by opening our hearts and hands to others.”

A little bit of an echo of what we heard from the church in Jerusalem here.

James and Patricia decided to let the letter from Philippi speak for itself on their Sunday. They read through the entire epistle and allowed Paul’s voice to dominate.

Here are a few of the verses from that letter that particularly speak to me.

CH 1 : 15. Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Ch. 2: ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

Ch 3 : 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ ...

Ch. 4: 8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Ch. 4: 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

After Philippi, we made our way to Ephesus.

On that Sunday, the focus statement was : With the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, Christians may work together to persevere in situations that would demoralize and paralyze those Christians individually.

German and Martha Lucia used that service to look at the ways Paul suffered for his faith and for his work for the Gospel. And, following the Leader material, they examined the ways that, in spite of his difficulties, Paul experienced the re-energizing gifts of the Holy Spirit. They then asked us to give some thought to how **our churches today experience these gifts, especially as a community? How is God working among us right now?**

We then visited Corinth with Catherine Balfour and Gabi. The focus statement was : Christian values often clash with the surrounding society's values. Demonstrating our values through our actions is the best witness. Reconciliation with nonbelievers first and foremost involves removing barriers so that people may begin to receive the healing and wholeness of God.

That service then examined how we might experience this healing and wholeness of God. Catherine led the group in a guided meditation, and Gabi shared some thoughts on mindfulness, linking up with the Corinthian passages on love and patience.

Gabi reminded us that Jesus wasn't afraid to reach out and physically touch those who were in need. He wasn't preoccupied with his own agenda or fixated on his own problems. When he was with someone in need, that person was his agenda; that person's problems were his problems. He *attended* to the person's needs. He gave his full attention, not just part of it.

Mind you, Gabi also reminded us that sometimes Jesus needed to attend to his own needs. He would go off by himself, to pray, to meditate. He would take the time to re-energize himself, and he would then re-enter the fray, knowing that even he couldn't do it without his on-going connection to God the Father.

From Corinth, we moved on to Thessalonica, with Bimal.

The focus statement was : Jesus will rescue our suffering world and make things right. This is our hope. We live in the tension of working (by the power of the Holy Spirit) to bring about God's kingdom now and of knowing that only Christ can bring about the fullness of God's kingdom.

The church in Thessalonica is suffering, enduring persecution for their faith. Paul is worried on their behalf, and his letters are an attempt to encourage and reassure them.

I think the one thing that struck me most about the church in Thessalonica was a statement taken from Acts, chapter 17. It was one of the passages we read earlier.

A mob forms in the city and comes looking for Paul and Silas. They don't find them, but take Jason instead, and bring him before the city authorities with the following accusation : "... *These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ...*"

I frankly haven't typically envisaged these early churches as "turning the world upside down". Yes, there are little pockets of believers here and there who irritate some of the Jewish community, but my own impression has been of a movement that grows at a fairly modest rate, a few thousand people in a very few locations.

But clearly, they were not perceived as minor irritants by their contemporaries. They were "... turning the world upside down ..." and within only three hundred years, and in spite of severe persecution, they become the principal religion of the Roman Empire, with even the Emperor Constantine himself being baptised before his death.

They are soon the dominant religion in Europe, and remain so for the next two thousand years, with only passing threats from moors, mongols and huns.

But, of course, today we live in a pluralistic world in which Christianity is only one of the faiths that has a place in our societies. And for a hint of how to navigate this new reality, we pass from Thessalonica to Colossae.

Mel, Jonah and Cynthia took us there last week. The focus statement for that Sunday : Making an exclusive claim for Christ is uncomfortable in our pluralistic world. Yet Christ is the truth.

Mel expressed having a certain level of discomfort with that bald statement, as I suspect most of us would. It's one thing to say I believe this to be true, it's quite another to declare that I have a monopoly on understanding what is true.

The church in Colossae, a bit like the church in Antioch, is struggling with knowing how to relate to the various expressions of faith surrounding them. They are particularly struggling with how the various philosophies and teachings risk influencing their understanding of Jesus' message, and Paul writes to them to try to reinforce their faith.

Mel suggested in his message that we all live by faith, in some way or another. The simple fact of being thinking, feeling, human beings means that we move through each day trusting that our previous experience of life gives us reason to anticipate how *this* day will play out.

But, there are many variables that affect how we navigate our life, and so we make choices. And one of those choices is to choose to follow Christ. To choose to follow Christ in the midst of a myriad of other possible choices.

And that brings me to explain the decision to select today's readings from the book of Acts.

The three readings, I think, help pull together the different messages we had this summer.

But I think they do it best by taking them in reverse order.

The reading from chapter 17 is the one that includes the statement that these Christians "... are turning the world upside down ..."

The message brought by this Jesus is a radical and world changing message. It goes to the heart of what it means to be human, and it expects us to respond in radical and direct ways.

The reading from chapter five includes the caution from Gamaliel that "... if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them ..." I'm frankly not sure that the simple fact that Christianity has lasted this long is proof of anything unique about Christianity – there are other religions that have lasted as long or longer.

And yet, it *has* lasted. There is something about this message that resonated with communities in each of the cities we visited this summer. There is something about this message that continues to resonate with us. And we are here this morning to give expression to our faith.

And finally, the reading from chapter 3 is the one in which Peter and John come across a lame man outside the temple. Peter approaches and says "... I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk ..."

I think this is a fitting image of what it means to live in a world of suffering; a world of conflict; a world of many voices clamoring for our attention.

We have a message worth sharing. We may not have silver or gold; we may not have all the resources of the world; we may not even have what the world thinks it wants or needs.

But we do have Jesus and Jesus' message. A message that is life-giving and life-sustaining. A message that underlines our obligations to each other; that empowers us to put others ahead of ourselves; that gives us hope that there is sense to all that is going on around us. A message that we choose to embrace. And a message that we can freely share with those willing to hear it.

To repeat what I said at the beginning of this meditation, "God worked through the imperfect people of the early churches, and God is working through us, imperfect as we are!"