

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour. Acts 19.17.

Verses 11-12 are the sort that give Christianity and the Bible a bad name ... In an age of science and rationality talk of miracles makes us feel uncomfortable, but the mention of handkerchiefs that have touched St Paul being used to heal the sick frankly makes us modern-day Christians embarrassed. It's just ammo for Richard Dawkins, isn't it? How can any rational Christian believe that mediaeval superstition?

Now it's easy to caricature this bizarre behaviour in Ephesus as superstitious nonsense which Christians today should ignore, but it is my contention this morning that this is to miss the point of the passage. The God of the Bible is *not* into superstition. The one thing that really gets God mad is idolatry, the worship of statues and images. He hates sorcery and magic. The point of Acts 19 is that Ephesus was a *pagan* city. Ephesus was a deeply superstitious place. As we shall see later, it was obsessed with the worship of the goddess Diana, (or Artemis, as she was known in Greek). The Ephesians loved sorcery, and their books of spells were worth thousands, v19...

When they saw Paul healing the sick in the name of Jesus Christ, some of the local Jews tried to use his name as a magic spell, v13... Ephesus was a city full of voodoo and the occult. Superstition is what happens when people *don't* believe in the true God. We are all hard-wired to worship something, and if we don't worship God, we'll worship something. Why do you think we have the crazy worship of celebrity today? Why the insane adoration of Michael Jackson at his wacky funeral? Our modern

society is no more rational and scientific than Ephesus. Go to any newsagents and look at the mags - celebrity mags, occult mags. Even newspapers have horoscopes. This is the nonsense we fall into when we abandon the God of the Bible and of Jesus.

Now look at vv8-9a. In Ephesus, as was his custom, Paul preached in the local synagogue. They didn't listen... Paul then hired a lecture hall and preached for two years, vv9a-10... Rational discourse didn't make much headway in Ephesus.

But miracles *did*. Voodoo was what they understood. And so God met the Ephesians where *they* were, and spoke to them in terms they understood. When the Jews tried to exorcise in the name of Jesus, it all went wrong. It was like a bomb that went off in their face, vv13-16. It wasn't rational explanations in the hall of Tyrannus but spectacular divine *actions* that spoke to these Ephesians, vv17-19... V20 tells us that it was 'in *this* way that the word of the Lord spread and *grew in power*'.

Well, what does all this have to say to you today? It tells us something very important about the nature of God and how he works with us. First of all, he meets us all where we are, even if, like the superstitious Ephesians, it's a crazy place we're in. When Paul came to preach Jesus to the Athenians on the Areopagus, it was through philosophy. Paul picked up on the altar to the Unknown God but went on from there to give this God a name, the name of Jesus. Paul used their culture, quoting one of their poets. God spoke to the Athenians through words, not spectacular miracles, because there was no need. Words and philosophy were what was powerful to them.

But for the Ephesians it was different. Words meant nothing. They wanted *signs*. God meets us where we are, however crazy that place might be. God doesn't wait for the drug addict to be rehabilitated before he starts on him. He meets him where he is, in the gutter, and then lifts him up. He doesn't wait for you to stop worrying, or to become a better person, before he can deal with with. He meets you where you are right now, and then moves you on. The point is that God is Lord of everything. He is Lord of philosophy. He trumps superstition. He can conquer worry and depression. He can free the addict.

We should not be embarrassed at this account of magical healing handkerchiefs. Such miracles were not the norm then, and they're not the norm now, but the situation in pagan Ephesus demanded this for Christ to shew his Lordship in a way they could grasp. And it worked, vv19-20...

I've been rereading Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, and the situation is exactly the same there. The only way Christian missionaries could convince superstitious pagan Britons was to shew that Jesus could do even better than their gods. I was brought up in Dorset, and near Wimborne is an amazing church. The village of Knowlton was wiped out by the Black Death in the 14thC but you can still see the 12thC church built right in the middle of a Neolithic henge earthwork which had been used for pagan ritual. The message was clear: Christ trumps all that.

So let's worship God, for being so amazingly understanding of our characters and situation; for meeting each of wherever we happen to be at the moment; and for wanting to move us on to a better place, to Jesus Christ who is Lord of everything.

But one last thought. If God wanted to move the Athenian philosophers on from their agnosticism and scepticism, and the Ephesians on from their superstition and voodoo, what does he want to move *us* on from in our own society?

I've already said how much more superstitious British society is than many realise, but the real enemy today is *consumerism*. We are all gripped by this dreadful acquisitiveness that cons us into thinking that the more we have, the happier we shall be. And so we're all working ourselves to death, getting stressed out, harming our marriages and family life, because we're trapped on the treadmill of working all the hours God sends to earn the money to buy the stuff we don't really need. The truth is less is more!

And this false god of consumerism doesn't deliver the goods. Why are so many people on drugs? We have never had so much money, enjoyed such comfort, and yet there's so much unhappiness, and that feeling that life is meaningless and purposeless. Jesus meets us in this crazy place we find ourselves today. People are looking for deeper things, for meaning, significance, for a sense of purpose in their lives. Our people are not bad; they've just been sold a pup. The false gods of consumerism and materialism cannot feed the soul.

No-one wants to be just a number. We want to count, to be loved. Jesus is Lord even of our consumerist society. Appetite and satisfaction are what we understand today. Well, only Jesus fully satisfies. Only he loves us so much that he would die for us. Only he rose again to give us the life we crave. You want to live the life? Only Jesus gives that. He is Lord.