

## 132 "Phebe our sister ...."

We have been thinking about peoples' many notions of Knowledge, Understanding, Reality and Truth - their "KURTs". When we are faced with a range of contradictory KURTs, we must sift between them by asking: How likely is this notion of KURT to be genuine, in view of the credentials on which it is based? (Since the writing of this Reflection there have been three atrocities committed by Islamist jihadis, in Tunisia, Kuwait and France; these foul deeds are an all-too-timely example of the need for our KURT-sifting, for the perpetrators are utterly convinced that they alone are following the ultimate KURT).

In the early days of the Christian Faith, the apostles presented the Good News of Jesus Christ in a noisy, confused market-place of KURTs. Their hearers had to sift what they were being told about Jesus Christ on the basis of His "credentials", and then come to their own decision about Him, which came down to: Am I with Him, or not?

One good soul who had heard, who had sifted, and who had accepted the Lord as her Lord, was a lady named Phebe, (her name literally means "bright" or "radiant"). We come across Phebe just once: "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, a servant of the church at Cenchrea, that ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also" (Romans 16.1-2, AV).

Phebe is the first in a long list of people who are mentioned by Paul at the close of his letter to the Christians in Rome. We know nothing of her age, family background, character, or when she became a Christian, but what we do know teaches us much, and encourages us greatly.

She lived in Cenchrea, the eastern port of the great city of Corinth, through which much of the trade and commerce between Corinth and Asia passed. We know that Corinth itself was a spiritually-chaotic, idol-filled place, and can assume Cenchrea was much the same.

In Acts 18 we read of Paul arriving in Corinth from Athens, and teaming up with Aquila and Priscilla. They worked hard in the midst of the usual hostility and opposition, and from their efforts the Holy Spirit brought many souls of Corinth and Cenchrea, probably including Phebe, into the Kingdom by faith in Jesus Christ. Against all the human odds, two Christian fellowships had come into being.

So here is Phebe in Cenchrea: a fairly recent convert to Christ; a member of a small Christian community whose members are drawn from various backgrounds and who between them have little clue as to what the Christian life is to mean in practice; they are living in a rough place, surrounded by rampant wickedness. Quite a challenge!

But what a fine Christian saint she has become! As a fellow Christian, she is a "sister" to Paul and the others. Yes, in the Lord we truly are brothers and sisters, members of the same family - the Lord's family.

Phebe is a "servant" ("diakonos", a deaconess), holding an official position in her local church. As a deaconess she does not have an "up-front" role in evangelism, preaching or teaching. Instead, in a role less visible but no less important, Phebe faithfully serves amongst the members of the local body of Christ, keeping things running as they should do.

Paul describes her as "a succourer of many" (verse 2), including of Paul himself. The Greek word for "succourer" - "prostatis" - occurs just this once in the New Testament. Its literal meaning is something more than mere "helper". It speaks of Phebe holding a position of some pastoral authority, as a sort of female guardian, a "protectress" of her fellow Christians, be they locally based or even the famous Paul. She was obviously one of the "key players" in the church.

Phebe is now setting out for Rome, we are not told why, and Paul warmly commends her to the Christians in Rome. His whole message is "This one's OK! Trust her, take her in, give her a hand" - necessary words in those days of wolves in sheep's clothing, of false KURT's.

We thank the Lord for bright, radiant Phebe and for all like her - ordinary Christians like us, who are "getting on with it" for the Lord

and His people, in or out of the public eye, wherever they are, whatever the challenges.

Phebe will have made a huge difference to many, many people - a difference far greater than she would ever have realised at the time. Nothing has changed: under the same Lord, so can we.

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