

The Life of the Church

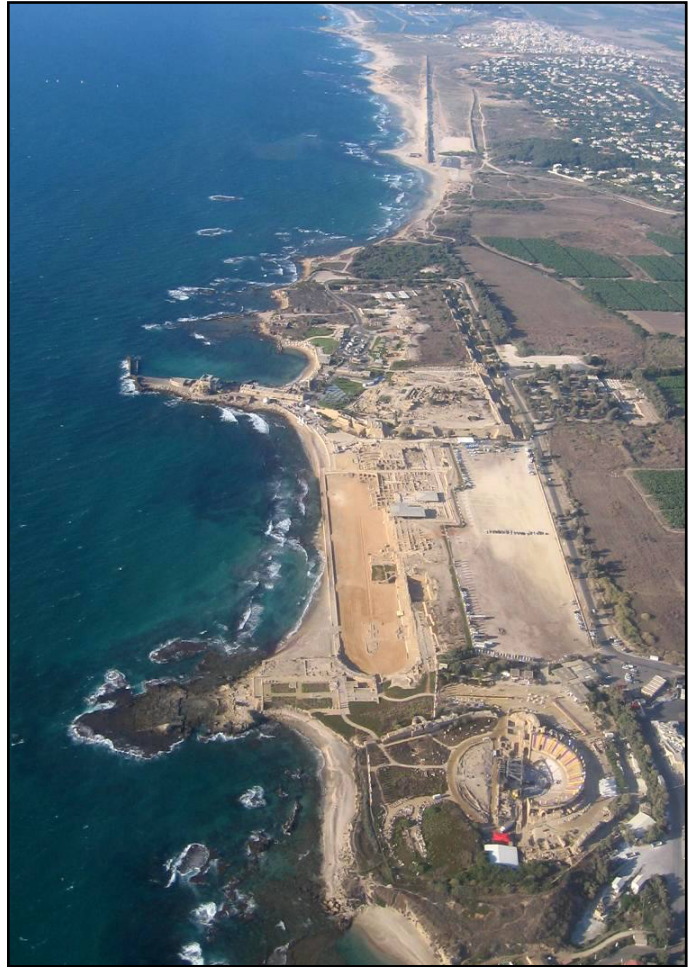
Learning our Church History

Part 4 - Caesarea by the sea

The significance of place

When we study our church history we realise that there are significant moments, but that those moments are grounded in particular places. In our more recent church history Wittenberg and Geneva played key roles in the development of the Reformation. In Scripture we see places like Bethel, Gilead, Bethlehem and Jerusalem ebb and flow in the story of God's people as being significant to the story of salvation. In the third and fourth centuries of the church the city of Caesarea Maritima played a key role in the spread of the gospel. It is a city rich in history—biblical history and church history. Today it is a national park in Israel, but previously it was one of the most important cities in Judea. Herod the Great built his palace there, and in AD6 it became the administrative capital for the Roman governors of Judea. The governors would often go up to Jerusalem to conduct business, but their palace of choice was Herod's palace at Caesarea Maritima. As the governor's main residence, it saw a lot of commercial and political activity, giving it great prominence.

Read: 1 Timothy 6: 11-21



Pontius Pilate



Pontius Pilate was the fifth Roman governor of Judea from AD26 to 36. Rome began to rule Judea directly, through governors rather than the Herodian family, after Herod's son Archelaus was banished to Gaul in AD6. A broken stone found in the theatre at Caesarea Maritima mentions Pontius Pilate by name and by title, Praefectus Iudaeae ("prefect of Judah"). "Prefect" was a term for a seasoned military officer in command of 500 to 1,000 auxiliary troops. Pilate was dependent on the governor of Syria for these troops. Like all of the early prefects of Judea, he was a native of Italy (the name Pontius has been traced to the hills of south-central Italy). The stone was a very significant find, as it proves the biblical account in witnessing to the existence of a ruler named Pontius Pilate. Who, as his predecessors and successors did, resided in Caesarea Maritima. But what is significant is that the man who ruled from Caesarea Maritima

is mentioned in the Gospels and in the Apostles' Creed. His mention is a reminder that this Christian faith of ours is grounded in space and time by identifying the governor at the time of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Wednesday, 28 February 2024



The Place of Paul

Paul was in Caesarea many times. Its port provided a suitable launching point for Paul to set out on his missionary journeys. He also spent two years there as a prisoner (Acts 24: 22-27). Paul came to know the city very well.

Read: Acts 9 26-31

Peter also knew this city. He baptised the Roman centurion Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10:1).

Eusebius: The Father of Church History

Moving into the period after the apostles, the church historian Eusebius was from Caesarea Maritima. In his book *The History of the Church*, Eusebius records the exploits of the Roman emperor Diocletian, who launched an empire-wide persecution of Christians. Eusebius tell us the jails were so full of Christians under Diocletian that it launched a crime spree. The officials were so concerned with arresting Christians that common criminals were literally getting away with murder under the reign of Diocletian. One of the victims of Diocletian's persecution was Pamphilus of Caesarea Maritima. Pamphilus, a Christian, was a significant figure in the life of the city and gets credited for building up the city's library. It was one of the best libraries in the ancient world. It is estimated that at one time it held more than thirty thousand manuscripts. It attracted scholars in all fields from across the empire. Theologians and early church leaders also made pilgrimages to study at Caesarea Maritima. Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible, spent time looking at the manuscripts, researching, and writing at Caesarea Maritima.



Some other significant church figures, such as Gregory Nazianzus and Basil the Great, also spent time there, so great was its library and prominence as a centre of study. This city by the sea played a significant role in the New Testament and is one of the key places in church history.

We have seen how this city has played a key role in how we worship today and understand our place in the history of God's redemptive story. Place is significance to us today. Where we live and where we worship. Galatians 4: 4-5 tells us,

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

The gospel needs to be set in a particular place, at a particular time. When we see the importance of this as evidence for faith, we then appreciate each place God has us as opportunities for him and gospel witness. There is no accident in the story of faith. We each are because God's has us here. The question is: will we be attentive to how God is leading us in the place and in this time.

We may not get our name in a creed as Pontius Pilate did, who ruled from Caesarea Maritima, but we are each involved in kingdom work. Our faithful living for Christ and serving him will bring blessing in this age and in eternity to come.

Questions to Discuss

1. Has there been a significant place that has shaped your faith in Jesus Christ?
2. How do we see where we are now as an opportunity to be the blessing in this age and in eternity?
3. In what ways can we shape "this place" to be significant for the gospel in the years to come?

