

Phoebe – All-age Story

Phoebe was born in Egypt, a decade or two later than Jesus was born in Bethlehem and then taken to Egypt by his parents who had to flee.

Phoebe's father was a city clerk. He worked in the government quarters as a secretary of the Roman governor.

When the Emperor in Rome sent Phoebe's father's boss to Greece to work for the Roman government there, Phoebe's father and his family followed.

They moved to a town called Kenchrea near Corinth. Kenchrea was the harbour town of the region. Phoebe and her family again moved into a little house in the government quarters, very close to where Phoebe's father worked in a gorgeous palace with lots of offices and congress halls. Her father was writing records of all the government meetings and kept them neatly in a small archive. He had pens and quills, and finest papyrus sheets.

Whenever he could, he took little scraps and pieces home to his little daughter.

Phoebe had a pen which she treasured.

There were no schools for girls in Kenchrea, but Phoebe was clever, smart, and curious. She was an only child. She learned fast and remembered accurately what she had learned. To her father it was a delight to let her come to his desk share with her his passion for letters and books. He taught his young daughter the Greek alphabet. So, Phoebe could read and write.

Also in Kenchrea, lived her old relative, auntie Lois. Auntie Lois' house was near the harbour and not far away from a beautiful beach.

Phoebe loved the beach.

Phoebe loved the harbour with the big trading ships being loaded and unloaded, and the jumble of words of the sailors from all over the world.

And what Phoebe loved most, was when she put her little hand in auntie Lois' hand, and the two of them walked through the loud and busy harbour to the peaceful sandy beach with its seagulls and ducks, with the fine white sand, the salty breeze, and the gentle waves.

As they walked, auntie Lois told Phoebe lots and lots of stories... Stories of far away countries, beautiful cities and ships and camels and coaches to travel there. When auntie Lois was young. She had a husband. He was a tradesman and bought and transported and sold the most exotic spices. At his side she'd travelled a lot.

She'd seen foreign kingdoms with kings and queens (!), she'd heard the most fascinating languages, seen the most beautiful clothes and fabric, tasted the finest food.

She'd met women who were traders themselves, who had their own business, ran their own household. She'd met women who were teachers and priests, healers, and philosophers.

Auntie Lois told Phoebe of libraries with thousands and thousands of books, and what was best: these places were open to the public. Everybody could go there... men and women, boys and girls, rich and poor.

In the libraries there were shelves and boards and trunks with books and scrolls, and there were chairs and tables to sit at and read and study and nourish your dreams of colourful worlds and fantastic life stories.

Phoebe loved listening to her auntie. The images of auntie's stories sprang to her mind and remained there as colourful paintings of Phoebe's imagination. And when Phoebe got home from their long walks on the beach, she sat down in her little chamber, got out her basket with the pen and the papyrus scraps and wrote them all down, one awesome story after the other...

Phoebe - Sermon

Sisters and brothers,
a woman arrives in Rome.

Tired and exhausted from a dangerous journey. It was a risk to travel alone – if you were a woman. You didn't often find companions on the road who were friendly or who would offer protection – although that was exactly what Phoebe (Romans 16: 1f) needed.

Now she is knocking at the door of Priscilla and Aquila's little house in a cramped and overcrowded part of Rome. The huge city is full of social problems and political corruption... Priscilla and Aquila cautiously open the door and let Phoebe in. Priscilla leads the visitor to the big room in which the small Christian church in Rome holds their meetings. Phoebe likes the place immediately. It reminds her of her home church in Kenchrea. Aquila puts down a bowl of water in front of her and hands her a fresh white towel. Phoebe sits down, exhausted and excited. For a moment she closes her eyes, then chases away the memory of her dangerous journey and lowers her feet into the water.

Priscilla & Aquila serve their guest a tray of bread, cheese and wine. They talk about Phoebe's journey, about the friends they have in common, about Paul and the texts he writes, about the small Christian communities and the hostility they are exposed to in so many places. Aquila comes back into the room. He has quickly arranged to meet with Christian sisters and brothers. Phoebe and the Christians in Rome will together read the letter Paul, the apostle, had sent through Phoebe.

Phoebe is a colleague of Paul's. She works with him. In Kenchrea she is a pastor. She proclaims the good news. She preaches. She teaches. And now at this moment, when she arrives in Rome with Paul's letter in her hand, she is not only the post woman, she is a true witness of Paul's theology and his message to the Christians in the city. Phoebe knows the content of the letter. She is able to read and explain it to the others.

Phoebe reads about the life of the Christian family as an act of worship. She reads how Christians should care for each other and stand up for each other. She reads about love and honour, about zeal and commitment, about joy, hope, patience and persistence, about prayer, acceptance and hospitality, about unity in Christ, sympathy, modesty and more... Phoebe reads:

**Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.**

**Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. (Romans 12: 9ff)**

What sounded like a list of points coincidentally put together was exactly what the Christians in Rome had been reflecting on for a long time already. On the one hand there were these extremely important theological questions, and on the other hand there was all the everyday struggle within this small community. They were all young Christians. They all came from all sorts of places, and they had hardly anything in common other than their faith in Jesus Christ. They were all in trouble because they followed Jesus.

Nobody trusted them.

Nobody liked them.

They were accused of the weirdest offences.

It was dangerous to be a Christian in Rome in those days.

The Roman Christians who listen to Paul's letter know so well how dangerous the situation is for them. Many of them are frightened. Many have stopped coming to the weekly gatherings. Many of them are suffering from illness, unemployment and poverty. None of them has a chance to have an influence on what is going on in the country.

To proclaim the resurrection of Christ was one of the most dangerous things to do in those days. Living Christ's way meant, opposing the corrupt and unjust system of the Roman Empire.

Paul's letter is a real challenge.

He writes that he expects his sisters and brothers to mutually accept each other; to value each other; to give the same rights to everybody – no matter what sex, age or nationality the person is. He shares with them his vision of people who are not biologically related to each other, becoming family – all because of their faith in Christ. He wants them to live differently, to resist the rules and regulations of society and to reform their community.

Phoebe reads about solidarity with all who suffer and mourn – but also about the brighter sides of community life. Paul draws their attention to the joy they can experience together: children being born, happy marriages, and people recovering from illnesses. Paul commands them to help each other, to support each other in need, to accept everybody into the community, to share what they have, and to give all they can give.

She reads about blessing those who persecute them.

All young Christians had experiences of persecution. Some of them had left home and family to escape. The memory of what they have been through, and Paul's demands to love and to forgive, are almost too much for them.

There'd been too much violence, too much oppression, hate and suspicion.... too much for an individual to bear. But not too much for a loving and forgiving community to cope with, Paul writes.

Paul believed they could do it, if they did it all together: the showing of mercy and loving the enemy.

Pray together, Paul says. Remember, share, ask, plead, comfort, confess and weep together. That will help. That can give you new hope and strength to carry on.

The situation in Rome in the first century after Christ was different from ours today. But can you feel it?

Can you see it: we are sitting right in the middle of those sisters and brothers in Rome long ago.

We, too, are working for justice in a society that is not caring well for its poorest and weakest members.

We, too, would like to see more respect towards just everybody – no matter who they are.

We, too, need more solidarity with refugees and strangers and God knows who...

We, too, must show more sympathy for those in pain and offer unlimited hospitality and care to those who need it.

We, too, sometimes feel weak, frightened, exhausted...

We, too, need Paul's encouraging vision of a community not related biologically but growing together as the family of God to make a difference in this world.

We, too, need people like Phoebe, entering our lives and showing us a new way. We need sisters, leaders, people who are doing good things...

And: we can be Phoebes: we can embrace others and make them our family of God, we can lead and guide others, and we can care for each other and share with each other...

I could go on like this...

But, all I want to learn today from the extraordinary figure of Phoebe is: to live a Phoebe-life... lead in the church, take risks, stretch beyond my comfort zones, read and write and pray, be a friend and have friends, and belong closely to the awesome family of God in this world.

Amen.