

## **‘Phoebe – A Story’**

*by Paula Gooder*

I prefer to learn through stories rather than non-fiction. I love understanding how people tick - what their back story is that influences who they are and what they do. I also love the idea of communities that work together, support and love each other.

Paula Gooder ticks all my boxes in this masterful and moving story woven around Paul’s mention of a lady called Phoebe in his letter to the Romans. Paula uses her extensive biblical scholarship to imagine the characters and events in the early Roman church. Each individual has their gifts and flaws and very different backgrounds – from slave to Roman patrician, Jew and gentile – yet meld into a loving community, grappling with Paul’s letters and how to live as Jesus taught them.

Phoebe’s story unfolds as she becomes part of this community and learns her worth and her purpose through their love and her increasing faith. We are given insight into each character’s challenges and growth and, as we are immersed in the story and identify with many aspects of their struggles, can richly imagine belonging to this group too.

For those who like facts, Paula provides a wealth of biblical and other references that she uses to validate and build her story in an appendix at the end of the book.

For me, there is only one disappointment in the form of an unnecessary historical inaccuracy right at the end – but this is forgivable in the light of the warmth and learning I gained from the rest of the book. I would thoroughly recommend this book as a good read but, more importantly, as a glimpse into how honest, vulnerable, encouraging relationships in our faith communities can provide space for doubt and enquiry, mistakes and forgiveness, growth and ever increasing love for God and each other.

Review by Sally Bowcock