

“The church in Antioch” on June 9th 2013.

Acts 11:19-30; Text also used - Matthew 24:1-14

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We are watching our favourite television programs, and then the tv adverts come on – what do you do, maybe you go get a beer, some snacks, go to the toilet, you flick channels, you are waiting until the next important part begins.

We can maybe have that attitude towards this passage from Acts. We come across it in an action packed middle section of the book. In Acts 9, we have Saul’s conversion to Christianity – Saul we know as Paul. In Acts 10, we have had the highly important event of Cornelius’ conversion and that the message of the Lord Jesus is for all people and not just for the Jews. And then, in Acts 12, we have Peter’s dramatic escape from prison, involving an angel as he just walks out pass the guards, and after that come Paul’s missionary journeys. In among these vivid events comes our passage. It can feel like an intermission – let’s just read it, there isn’t much there, and let’s get to the next big thing Luke wants to tell us. But this is a rich passage...

To place Antioch in context.

Antioch was 400 miles north of Jerusalem. At the time, it was the third greatest city after Rome and Alexandria, and so became the first great city where Christianity gains its footing. Jerusalem was perhaps only a 10th of the size of this city. Once established, the biblical focus remains on Antioch which will be the base for the coming missionary journeys which will help establish Christianity in modern day Turkey and Europe. It is here that the person at the heart of this expansion of the good news – Saul, who becomes known as Paul, re-enters the story. It is here that the name of Christian is first given to a follower of Jesus Christ - whether it was a mockery term or where it was a group nickname or just a description, it shows they were a clearly distinct group. They could not be fitted into the Greek / Roman god worldview where there was almost a place for anything; and they could not be fitted into Judaism, due to the numbers of Greeks in it, as well as how this new group did not adhere to Jewish customs such as those relating to food or circumcision. A new group, a new lifestyle, a new name. Finally at Antioch, we see by descriptions used by Luke, that what had happened in Jerusalem - growth and generosity - is now happening in Antioch.

Persecution

The church is formed in Antioch not be mission strategy but enforced migration. We read – how the church is founded through the witnessing by those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen... Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and after his death, a strong vicious persecution breaks out, which is led by Saul. Most of the Christians flee Jerusalem and some of these Jewish Christians come to Antioch.

Jesus in a number of places stated that persecution would be part of the church’s life. And persecution is something very relevant today. I was an assistant pastor for four years – in a church where Andras preached in 2004 – it has only taken me 9 years to return the favour! But where I was – a church

called All Saints – one of their passions was for supporting Christians persecuted across the world. And that passion was passed onto me. Across the world today, millions of Christians face persecution for simply doing what you are doing – gathering to worship, praying to God, called Jesus your Lord and Saviour, and trying to act like Jesus would where you live or work or at your schools or universities. For example in Syria, last year 227 Christians reported kidnapped; in North Korea, entire families are placed into prison camps if one family member is discovered to be a Christian; in Columbia, pastors are often targets for the various terrorist groups. Many face torture and labour camps, while over a 100 Christians a month are executed. A Christian organisation such as Open Doors¹ has will give more information about the main countries where this happens. But when persecuted Christians are spoken to, the main thing they ask for is prayer – not money or for you to go, but for you pray... We cannot forget these our brothers and sisters of Christ.

A striking element that happens in our passage that these persecuted Christians come to Antioch, and do they simply form a church and keep their head down? No, they start sharing their faith.

This is amazing – the thing which has brought persecution, they continue to do. It is so easy when we stand up for our faith – we state something in a meeting, or we are working with someone in a job – and we get knocked back, maybe swore at, we know they don't like it, and maybe we feel got at. So easy, when the next thing comes along, to not stand up, because we know we may get knocked again or have another confrontation etc. But here, these Christians, stand up again, they share the faith – knowing, maybe, persecution could easily start again and maybe even they would have to flee again. This is, not, as Jesus warned, Christian love growing cold, but Christian love burning bright and strong.

Their actions also reveal something else – their Christian core values. They witness. At the start of Acts 1 – Jesus told his apostles, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. It is so easy to be witnesses when the pastor – drives us or inspires us, or our youth leader, or our elders or visiting missionaries come and help in programs. But what happens when these people are gone? As Andras said I am a pastor of two churches, (called St Johns and St Leonards) – I am away for 3 months - what is happening back there? I think what happens and how things are approached will reveal what core values exists in those churches.

These Christians – they have no apostles, they are perhaps young Christians, maybe some of them only believers for months or a few years, and they make the choice – they witness – part of their Christian core values as believers is to witness...

¹ www.opendoorsuk.org

They witness.

These visiting Christians witness in a culturally relevant way. The phrase – the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ – this is the first place in evangelism where Jesus is not called the Messiah, but is called Lord. The Greek Word used - ‘Kurios’ – meant for a Greek person not just Lord (like a master), but it was also a title used for their gods. The word Messiah had little or no meaning to a Greek, and so would have needed a lot of explanation. So, a new title is used for Jesus which is understandable to the listeners.

Our faith sharing, our witnessing must continue to be culturally relevant. In the Anglican church part of our ordination service contains the commission to “communicate the Christian faith afresh in each generation”. We consider the words we seek to use to communicate our faith, the pictures we use, the examples, seeking to be culturally relevant. What speaks to the smart phone generation; what speaks to the men and women who are waiting at the bus stop to go to work; what speaks to the elderly in the nursing home or to those who have to work long hours just to get a little bit of money. A good place for examples of this can be Alpha. For those who attend Alpha as leaders and helpers etc, it is easy perhaps to think – heard this talk again and heard that joke again and so it is now time to laugh. But, it is also a chance to listen carefully – you may know the ‘what’ very well, but think and learn about how it is communicated, and learn examples how to communicate the Good News.

However let us be encouraged as we struggle to find a way to share our faith. Christ is always culturally relevant because he is always humanly relevant. Beneath every human culture there are human beings who share the same human dilemma – spiritual estrangement. “All humans regardless of their culture, ethnicity, or religious context, are part of what God intended at the beginning – to be image bearers of the divine – and are part of what went wrong at the beginning – we have all fallen short of God’s glorious standard.”² The good news is that God longs for that estrangement to end, the barrier created between us and God by sins, and through belief and trust in Jesus Christ we can become his forgiven, accepted, secure, loved children.

I think of St Johns and St Leonards and those who found Jesus to be good news. I think of Kat and Jack – highly trained medical staff, Kat had always had questions, yet in Christ she discovered the missing piece of the jigsaw. I think of Leanne, full of tattoos, who brought her child for infant baptism, and then discovered how infant baptism is much more about just bringing a child, but bringing that child up in the Christian faith, and so she did Alpha, which helped her discover the good news and now she is one of my Alpha group leaders; and I think of Des – a man in his 50s, he works in a factory with a difficult manager, he went to church when young, but it didn’t influence too much, after his mother’s death he came back to church, and he has come to discover Jesus as Lord and God.

² (Anderson, Ray S., *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*,(Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2007), pp56-57)).

The hand of God is recognised.

Acts says: 'The Lord's hand was with them a great number believed and turned to the Lord.' Later, Barnabas is described as seeing the same thing – so it is repeated twice, and repetition can be one way Scripture is trying to get our attendance – it is as if Luke is saying, this is important so I am repeating it.

In previous significant moves of the gospel we see the clear work of God. At Pentecost, we hear the wind, the tongues of flame, the spiritual gifts at work; we see signs and wonders when the gospel comes into Samaria, and we see again powerful signs of God's Spirit when Cornelius becomes a Christian. When a significant moment for the expansion of the Kingdom of God, takes place and again we see the hand of the Lord at work, as if God is saying - it is His work, and while it is new, it is part of his kingdom work.

It is a reminder that this expansion of the church came not by human wisdom or even passion or strategy but by God's power. Jesus at the end of Matthew 28, said – go and make disciples of all nations... and then at the end he said: and surely I am with you to the end of the age." So we see the hand of the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit at work – he is present. So we can be confident as we seek to share our faith, to witness, we do so with the Lord's help. It is easy to perhaps rely just upon our own wisdom, or passion and strategy. Moses gives us another perspective. At Mount Sinai, God tells Moses that his angel will go ahead of the Israelites. But Moses says unless God himself goes with them, then they do not want to leave. We need to have Moses' passion – Lord we need you to be involved in this ministry, we need you to help us in our children's camp or our youth group tonight, or our young mothers group... we praying asking, longing to see the hand of the Lord at work...

But for us, what does it mean to see the hand of the Lord? What Barnabas saw was a totally new way of doing church - Greeks and Jews worshipping together, praying together, fellowship together; Jewish ancient laws were optional for Greeks to follow; Jewish traditional customs were set aside as Jews eating with Greeks. So the hand of God can be in something new, maybe uncomfortable, maybe even when we aren't sure if we agree with it.

That is a challenge... we can say, this is not God's hand, because it simply does not fit with what we expect or personally like.

Involving others.

Barnabas sees God at work, and then he goes and gets Saul. Barnabas is someone who recognises he cannot do this by himself perhaps – he needs help. So easy to be someone who feels – only I can do this, or only I should do this, and we do not ask for help...

But maybe Barnabas had a different view – he *could* do it all by himself, but he saw a chance to involve someone else. He knew about Saul, apparently not very active in a nearby city.

One of the courses we have run is an Anglican course called 'Everybody Welcome' – it looks at welcoming new people to church – but it more than just your welcome team. The course is also thinking about your building, what does it say as people enter those doors, what do they see, who do they meet etc, but the welcome extends beyond that – how welcoming is the service and how welcoming is the church once that person comes into the worship space – will someone speak to them, maybe even sit with them so they know what is going on or when to get up or sit down etc... and also how welcoming is the church after the service – will they stand by themselves as they have coffee or will they be spoken to others and introduced?

But there is another element – real welcome is welcoming them into the heart and life of the church – so they are fully contributing members, feeling this is their church family. Barnabas welcomes Saul not just into the church but also allows him to use his spiritual gifts, his passions, his abilities, his personality and his life experience.

There is a risk here of course. Remember Saul's background – the founding Christians of this church were forced here by persecution, done by Saul. So can you imagine when he came through the door – Barnabas introduces him – 'hello everyone this is Saul' – some of you may have heard about him – 'yes', thought some of them, 'he arrested my parents, or because of him my whole family had to leave our homeland and now we are here...' Yet, it says Saul and Barnabas taught great numbers of people... there are no indication of issues with Saul. Luke is not hiding or avoiding things I believe. In his writings, Luke does include church problems quite often. For example he mentions lying among members in Acts 5; grumbling in Acts 6; a senior leader being asked to account for his actions in Acts 11; and disputes between Christian leaders (in Acts 15), and between factions inside the churches, (also in Acts 15). Luke mentions nothing negative about Saul's reception in the church of Antioch. They have experienced the generosity of God to them and they extend that to Saul: as God has welcomed him into the family of God, he is welcomed into that church and he is able to teach them.

Generosity.

The Antioch church had encountered the generous gospel – all are invited to believe; they had seen the generous nature of Barnabas – both in his affirming of their ministry and their church. They had been generous in their acceptance of Saul.

Now they show generosity in giving. Through Agabus the prophet. they hear of a famine coming and they give – according to ability – to help the believers in Judah. These believers they had never met. So they give to meet a need which does not benefit them. They give to people who are hundreds of miles away. They give to help fellow Christians. And this is more striking because the famine is not in Judah, it is in the whole of the Roman empire which includes them – you would expect them to say – 'okay, a famine is coming, let's set aside some money to pay for food as food will get expensive, and thank you Lord for that insight'. They may have done this but Luke shares – they thought of others and gave to others.

The New Testament has this vision of churches supporting other churches. Also, Luke is interested in how generosity accompanies the gospel. In Acts 2 – the first weeks of the church we read of how people sell what they have and they give to any one in need – so no longer ‘mine mine mine’ but ‘ours!’ Again, in a later update about the church, in Acts 4, it says: ‘no one claimed any of his possessions were his own, they shared everything they had, no needy persons, as people from time to time sold what they had and gave it to the apostles to distribute’. Later, after Antioch we see how Lidia in Philippa (in Acts 16), invites them to stay at her home, while the jailer gives hospitality.

It appears to be generosity is a fruit of conversion of healthy church. On a personal note, St Johns, I see a growing spiritual maturity, which has been reflected in some of their decisions about giving as a church. I think Luke is onto something...

Conclusions

Persecuted believers, culturally relevant witnessing, the hand of God at work, involving others, and giving to others... This is an intermission would staying in for, when you come across this passage in your bibles...

(Grant Crowe)