

All Saints Talk for Sunday 15th Sept 2024

Spread the Word, Catch the Fire

'Missionary Church' Tom Yacomeni

Acts 11v19-30 The Church in Antioch

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

It is wonderful to have guests from Germany with us at All Saints today. Rosie's grandchildren Juliana and Josef Kiefer being baptised means we are being joined by friends and relatives from the continent, and it is great to be able to welcome them.

But as today's reading shows, it is only because of the inspired actions of some unnamed disciples from Cyprus that the gospel spread beyond its Jewish roots and reached beyond the middle East, so that today we can share fellowship with Christians all around the world whether they be in Germany, Georgia, Jamaica, or Japan.

The story of Acts as told by Luke the Doctor really falls into three distinct parts that echoes Christ's commission to the disciples before his ascension in verse 8 of the opening chapter: 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' Pentecost started the church in Jerusalem, Philip and Peter took the Gospel to Samaria and Judea, and now finally the story of the church being planted in Antioch marks the start of the mission to the ends of the earth.

Antioch was the third largest city in the ancient near East and very much a multicultural metropolis of half a million people. It consisted of four ethnic quarters, surrounded by a common wall and was the regional hub for trade and travel. It also had a reputation as a city of vice with worship of the goddess Daphne involving sex acts and ritual prostitution. So you might think it wouldn't be the best place to plant the next key church in the story of Christianity, but God works even in the toughest places and the Gospel goes where people are lost and need saving.

Verse 19 tells us that the believers who fled the persecution in Jerusalem and went to Antioch mainly reached out to Jews. The Jewish quarter was home to some 25,000 at the time so there was plenty of people to reach for Christ, but it was some unnamed disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene who started speaking to non-Jews as well. And then comes this wonderful phrase: 'the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.' When there is a healthy partnership between human effort and the Holy Spirit, the results are dynamic and extraordinary. The fact that the leaders are un-named is a testament to their humility but also the fact that God works through all sorts of people to accomplish his purposes. They simply got on with sharing their faith despite their fears and the church grew. But human nature being what it is, there can be a backlash of scepticism towards growth and change.

In these challenging times for the church in the West, the notion of numerical growth as a goal for churches has come under criticism, as though any strategy aimed at growing bigger and planting must be masking an ego trip or empire building. But over the summer as I have read Acts and been encouraged in my own reading, I want to reclaim the ground. Do we want All Saints to grow both numerically as well as spiritually? Yes absolutely, because more people coming to faith is evidence of God's grace at work. Living things grow and reproduce, and so it is with healthy churches.

Unfortunately back in Jerusalem there was some suspicion about all that was going on in Antioch. There were rumours of rampant growth, Gentiles being baptised,

unchecked Holy Spirit activity, all very concerning for the leadership. Who authorised this? Who are the leaders? Are these Cypriot people even trustworthy?

So they sent Joseph, another Cypriot who was nicknamed Barnabas to check it out. Thank God that Barnabas was the one they chose - we are only sat here today because of that man. What would have happened if they had sent a stickler for regulations instead of someone with the gift of encouragement?

Thankfully Barnabas came and when he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, *he was glad* and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

When the hand of the Lord is on a ministry, what is the evidence? Two things, *Growth and Grace*.

Growth comes when the church is healthy and sharing the life and message of Jesus freely.

Grace means lives are being transformed, people are freed from guilt and fear, broken souls are healed and they are empowered to live Godly lives of love.

But where there is grace there will also be mess. Someone said the church should be a hospital ship for the hurting, not a cruise liner for the comfortable. So we need to be prepared in what I think could be a season of growth for All Saints: If we want to see Grace, we should also expect mess too. Sometimes we will make mistakes, sometimes people will get in an emotional or moral pickle. Coffee will get spilt on the chairs and carpet. Things will get broken. Change is challenging, but as new parents will tell you new life is sometimes messy, tiring and unpredictable!

But when it happens let's be like Barnabas, who saw everything that was going on *and was glad*. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. No wonder he was called son of encouragement. Remember the first time we come across Barnabas was in Acts 4 when he sold a field and donated all the money to the church. He was willing to get stuck in with his own resources but he also went out on a limb when God was doing a new thing.

Not only did he encourage the new move of God amongst the Gentiles, he had a sense that new dynamic leadership was required, so he went to Tarsus to find Saul and fetch him back to Antioch.

After Saul had been converted on the road to Damascus, his letter to the Galatians tells us he went to Arabia and his home town of Tarsus for many years. Although there was a very explicit calling on his life, he doesn't actually begin public ministry

until Barnabas recruited him, they taught together and the church continued to grow.

We need to *Be more Barnabas*. That's a great tagline for today!

This passage spans quite a few years in the Chronology of the early church. Maybe even as many as ten years. Luke doesn't record outstanding miracles in this period, but instead a steady cycle of reaching people, teaching them, mending hearts and sending them out. At St. Paul's in WsM that was their tagline and I like it: Reach, Teach, Mend, Send. It is a helpful reminder of our core calling as the church.

As the disciple's influence grew, people started talking about them and they got named 'Christians'. Names can be positive or negative and the term Christian has accumulated a lot of baggage over the centuries, but at the end of the day, it's what we are. Christian means 'little Christ' or Christ follower, and that's ok with me. We just need to live up to our name with actions as well as words.

And that is what the Antioch church did. As soon as Agabus gave a prophetic word about a coming famine, the church collected funds to help. Barnabas and Saul went to Jerusalem to ensure the money was delivered properly. The community of the mother church was helped by the daughter church and they must have been so encouraged.

So a healthy church grows with grace, but it also gives and sends.

There is a constant flow of life in different ways, like a fountain pouring out refreshing water.

There have been a number of pictures over the years of water flowing through this church down the hill and out into the streets of Weston and beyond.

I would love it if everyone in this village saw this church as their well, a source of refreshing water, where we reach, teach, mend and send people to serve the Lord and bless this community. How do we do this? We share the life and message of Jesus, we celebrate what the Holy Spirit is doing and we give away our people, money, and resources where it is most needed.

Then the Lord's hand will surely be with us.