

Sunday 13th October. Acts 14:8-20 Worship the true Creator

Acts 14: Paul and Barnabas at Lystra

⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

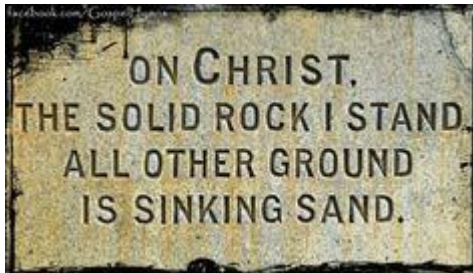
¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

This term we have been looking at the book of Acts, seeing how the early church grew through spreading the Word and catching the fire of the Holy Spirit. In recent weeks we've been studying the Apostle Paul's journey to faith and ministry which began in chapter 9 with his encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. When this once violent Jewish zealot saw the light and heard the voice of Lord Jesus speaking to him personally, everything he had ever known was turned upside down. He realised that instead of us trying to reach up to God by keeping the whole Jewish Torah law, God turned the tables and came down to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ. Through his life, his death and his resurrection, a new era of grace has begun. By believing in Jesus and putting our faith in what he said and did for us we can experience God's grace, forgiveness and future hope for ourselves.

Paul called this *the mystery* of the Gospel. He later wrote to the church at Colossae 'pray for us too that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim *the mystery of Christ*, for which I am in chains.' And in chapter 1 verse 27 he wrote 'This *mystery*... is Christ *in you*, the hope of glory'.

With the world in the state that it is in, with more and more bombs going off in the middle east, Ukraine, Russia and Africa, we need that hope more than ever.

So who here could do with a bit of glorious hope this morning? Who would like to know that the troubles we have in this life need not be the defining feature of our existence or experience? Who would like the reassurance that there are greater things yet to come, that there is hope for justice, hope for loving community, hope for intimacy and eternal security? Well join with Paul the Apostle and countless other Christians down the centuries who have stood firm in this truth: 'On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.'



The trouble is that as today's passage from Acts 14 shows us, even if we are trying to lead a faith-filled life sharing the life and message of Jesus with everyone, life still has a habit of being anything but straightforward and easy. For Paul it was challenging throughout. After many years of serving and learning behind the scenes in Arabia and Tarsus he was sent out with Barnabas from the city of Antioch. They travelled to Cyprus and up into the middle of modern day Turkey. He experienced the rejection of his own people and painfully decided to concentrate on preaching to the Gentiles. So then he travelled to a city called Lystra which in theory could yield a rich harvest for the Gospel. Lystra had a pluralistic culture with plenty of gods and rituals. It was a Roman colony with good commercial links and roads. Ideal church planting territory.

But things didn't go according to plan. Have you ever made brilliant plans only to have them go horribly wrong? Well if you listen to the story of Paul's day in Lystra you could be forgiven for thinking he would have been better off staying in bed:

It seems that Paul healed a lame man out of kindness, tried to explain to the excitable crowd that he was only human and not some sort of god or divine messenger as they assumed, and then got stoned half to death when they turned against him.

I wonder if that is the sort of day he would look back on and say 'well, what was that all about?!'

This was the first recorded healing miracle on Paul's missionary journeys. But I wonder if he would have done things differently if he'd had a chance to do it again. For example, whilst we assume that the lame man was listening to Paul speaking about Jesus, when he commanded the man to get up and walk, he didn't explicitly do it in Jesus' name. Christ certainly gave believers the authority to heal the sick and cast out demons at the great commission, but there is a danger that unless we are careful to keep Jesus centre stage, human nature means that people soon latch

onto the healer rather than the Holy Spirit. The crowd certainly got the totally wrong end of the spiritual stick.

Perhaps Paul hadn't done his cultural homework. Scholars tell us that the people of Lystra were superstitious about a folk tale written by Ovid, in which Zeus and Hermes visited the region around Lystra in disguise and destroyed it with floods when they found the hospitality lacking. I guess the people wanted to avoid a similar disaster happening to them. Cultural fears are a powerful social force – sometimes even in the face of reason.

So Paul and Barnabas' message got overtaken by events. Instead of the people giving glory to God, it ended up with the people glorifying them instead. And then as soon as their presumed celebrity status was found to be lacking, the crowd turned on them viciously.

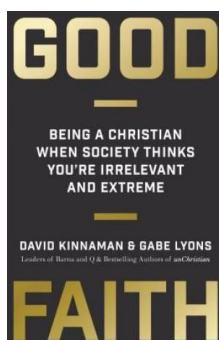
I think we see this behaviour in our own day. Celebrities are deified on the front covers of the tabloids on one day, only slaughtered and ridiculed the next. Who would want to be a football team manager nowadays? It's savage out there!

The people wanted to secure blessings and prosperity, but Paul and Barnabas tried their best to explain the truth of reality with reason. Instead of appeasing angry gods and sacrificing resources to earn blessings, the good news is that each and every one of us is invited to turn to the *living God* who loves us and kindly already provides for us in lots of different ways. On this Harvest Sunday we are simply giving thanks for the abundant provision of God – we can't earn or manipulate that, but our duty and joy is to give thanks and worship the true creator.

For many churches, particularly some of the biggest American ones, blessings and prosperity are still the key focus, when really what is needed is thankfulness for God's daily presence. When I see an American Televangelist seeking donations towards his new \$50M private jet, something is very wrong. The danger of idolatry remains a very real clear and present danger today.

So there is the danger of celebrity, the danger of idolatry, the danger of only seeking prosperity, but the final danger Paul faced was open hostility.

I read a book that has really helped me face up to the reality of our present times. It is by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, called 'Good Faith – being Christian when society thinks you're irrelevant and extreme'.



Based on research conducted by the Barna group, this is a book that admits that for many people, orthodox Christian beliefs are at best irrelevant or at worst dangerous and extreme. It doesn't just identify the problem but names solutions too. The authors suggest Christians can practice 'good faith' by listening, researching the culture, celebrating common grace, practicing countercultural hospitality but also graciously challenging what is confused and worthless in society.

Paul and Barnabas graciously challenged the people of Lystra to turn from worthless, vain things to the living God who made everything. But in the end they suffered for it.

It may be that to hold onto the authority of the Bible as the word of God will mark me as an extremist and land me in trouble one day. But I pray it won't be because I have been judgmental, hypocritical or unkind. It may just be that we live in a less receptive age, a time some are calling 'the digital Babylon'.

However I do also want us to look at this passage of scripture and take courage today. Whilst it may have looked like a disastrous day of ministry for Paul and Barnabas, there is evidence that God was at work nevertheless.

We read later on in Acts 16 that Timothy, Paul's assistant and valued colleague actually came from Lystra, and that his mother Eunice and his grandma Lois must have at some point become Christians. Clearly a church got started there. So evidently, despite this seemingly fruitless episode in Acts 14, in reality, some people had come to faith, and one of those would eventually become Paul's most loyal friend and mentee.

Nothing is wasted in God's economy. Even the most seemingly fruitless activity carried out in good faith can be the seed of kingdom growth and blessing.

So I want to encourage you, even if you feel your efforts for the gospel have been wasted at some point, don't despair. Keep sowing the seed because some of it may eventually fall on fantastic soil.

Take courage from fellow believers here at All Saints. Do encourage one another. The believers gathered round Paul in Lystra when he was left for dead outside the city. Perhaps they prayed for him. Perhaps they gently helped him to his feet. Perhaps they gave him a drink and invited him to their house to rest. Whatever they did it was just what was needed. Paul rose up and went back into the city, ready to travel on again the next day.

Encouragement like that is so important when we have had a tough day. To gather round, pray for each other and open our homes to allow people to recuperate is just what we all need from time to time. Thank you for doing that for each other!

So how did Paul look back on that day? I think he would have given thanks. A crippled man was healed. The seeds of the Gospel message were sown. The church had gathered round with prayer and encouragement. Despite all, it was a great day in the Kingdom! Let's pray together.