

Acts 13 sermon Tregear 18.10.2020 – What's different?

This week has been a real challenge for me as I've thought through this passage. I started with the whole chapter and now I've narrowed it down to 12 verses. The challenge is how does this account of God's work 2,000 years ago have relevance to us sitting here in church or at home on Zoom today? We're reading a story about 2 guys, Barnabas and Paul and their travels to other regions. We can't even visit neighbouring states in our country, though Ted did visit SA last week to visit his son and 2 grandchildren.

We need to understand what's going on for these first Christians and then think how that relates to us today.

So let's put our Jewish thinking caps on. The first 12 chapters of Acts focus on what is going on in Jerusalem. And then the focus changes. We look at this church in Antioch and one of its pastors, Saul or as we find out his name changes to Paul. And the rest of the book of Acts focuses on his travels as he takes the message about Jesus further and further into the Roman Empire.

As we look at v.1-3 we get a brief glimpse of the church in Antioch. So far we've heard about different people hearing the message about Jesus and responding but the only church we hear about is the one in Jerusalem. That was the key church at the beginning. But now here's this church in Antioch. This is a huge city. It's the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Jerusalem is way smaller.

Before we look at chapter 13 we need to go back to the end of chap 11. We didn't look closely at this a couple of weeks ago but it's important now.

Have a look on your Bulletin where it is printed or find it in your Bible. READ chap 11:19 – 21 Because of the persecution followers of Jesus are going to different centres. Eventually some come to Antioch. It's not just Jews who believe but EVEN Gentiles, Greeks. And a familiar phrase now – v.21 -- *The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed*

and turned to the Lord. Notice, again, that's it's God doing the work – "the Lord's hand was with them".

Read v.22-24 – Things are really happening in the city of Antioch. So much so that the church in Jerusalem send Barnabas to check out the church in Antioch. What does he see? **He sees what God has done.** God is at work in people's lives through the holy Spirit. He encourages them

Does he tell them all the things they should do? No. He says "remain true to the Lord Jesus with all your hearts". That's it. **Jesus is to be the one they are to follow, with all their hearts.** **Not** just on Sundays, but on Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday and so on, in everything.

And then again in v.24 "a great number of people were brought to the Lord" – the church is growing. So much so that Barnabas needs some extra help. He doesn't try to do it on his own but goes to get Saul. And so Saul and Barnabas teach the church about Jesus. And it's here that the disciples are first called Christians. It was almost certainly the people around them who called them that. These disciples weren't Jews in the traditional sense; and the Gentiles weren't following the traditional gods of the area – so these are a distinctive group, and the distinctive is that they said that they "belonged to Christ", they kept on talking about Jesus Christ. So they get called *CHRISTians*.

And one of the changes of these Christians is they are generous – v.27-30 – there's a famine; the church in Jerusalem is quite poor so the wealthier Antioch church help out and send money to these people they'd never met. And we finish off with the words that Barnabas and Saul take the gift to Jerusalem. It seems that they were the two key leaders by this stage.

So chap 13. In v.1 we're told that there are 5 prophets and teachers – a number of them would have been Gentile. Barnabas, a Jew. Simeon called Niger (Niger is Latin for 'black' so he may have been African), Lucius of Cyrene which is in north Africa, so he's a Gentile. Then

you've got Manaen, he had been raised as an adopted brother or close companion of Herod – the same Herod that killed John the Baptist and had Jesus come to him when he was on trial before his crucifixion. The Greek word translated “brought up with” has the idea of someone adopted by a family as a childhood playmate/friend. And then there's another Jew, Saul. What a mix of cultures and backgrounds. But they're part of a new family – Jesus' family.

The Holy Spirit is changing them; giving them a love for people they would never have dreamed of associating with, let alone invite to their home for a meal, or give money to people they've never met to help them.

So what are these leaders doing?

They're worshipping the Lord & fasting – Holy Spirit talks to them – SET APART 2 of your best men who've been teaching you – I've got some other work for them to do – so they bless them, lay hands on them & send them off. Just like that.

I imagine this church was very much like the Jerusalem church that we read about at the end of chap 2 & 4. So they're meeting together to pray, to learn from God's word; they support each other. But here are two features that are singled out. They were a church that “worshipped the Lord and fasted”

We often think of worship as singing and praising God. But here the word means serving God. The Greek word was used to describe the action of *doing public service at one's own expense*. In the Old Testament Greek version it was used to describe the service of the priests and Levites in the Temple. The thought here is that the church serves God when it gathers together, and, since elsewhere fasting is associated with prayer, it is likely, in this instance, that prayer is regarded as the serving or worshipping activity of the church. We've certainly seen a lot of references to prayer in the early church. Remember last week the church was praying for Peter, and that wasn't just a ten minute or one hour prayer meeting, they were praying all through the night. Fasting is mentioned alongside prayer on just one other occasion in Acts (chap.14), so it's not mentioned a whole lot. But I think this fasting indicates that this

is a special occasion, when the church felt it necessary to lay aside even the demands of hunger in order to concentrate on serving God and receiving his guidance.

I think a key thing for me is that the church appears to be waiting on God. They're waiting for a word, a direction, from God.

It got me thinking. **What does God want to do in our church?** What direction is God wanting us to take? I don't know, but that's ok. The Antioch church were just living as God's people, they were following Christ, listening to him, waiting on him. Can we trust God to lead us? In this time of Covid with so much uncertainty?

Here, in Acts, for the first time we have a church planning to take the message about Jesus to other places, foreign people, like Janet and Jo and Emma who we support. The Holy Spirit has spoken to individuals and used persecution but now it's a deliberate church decision.

So for our church. Does God want us to employ a youth worker or children's worker? I don't know. Does God want us to employ someone who might visit the families of the Preschool children? Maybe. Does God want us to employ or appoint someone as a chaplain for the Tregear Presbyterian Netball team? I don't know. There could be a whole range of things God might set apart people to do – are we listening and waiting on the Holy Spirit?

We do know that God has brought us together into his family. Let's worship and fast, be committed to praying to God, waiting on God to speak to us. And as God places a desire on people in our church let's set them apart, let's encourage them in the task God has given them. Let's commit each other to God's grace; pray for each other. It could be quite different to what we're used to.

In v.3, the church prays and fasts again for Barnabas and Saul, they commission them by placing hands on them and then send them off.

But where are they going? How long are they going for? Who's going to pay them?

It's ok, v.4 tells us they're sent on their way by who? – by the Holy Spirit. God's sending them, he can look after them.

And what do they do? v. 5 - “they proclaim the word of God in the Jewish synagogues”. This is familiar, isn't it. What's their job – to proclaim the word of God. To share the message about Jesus' death and resurrection.

They travel over the whole island.

The main story on Cyprus is about this guy Sergius Paulus, proconsul or governor on the island – he hears about this word of God. He calls Saul and Barnabas because he wants to hear the **word of God**.

Opposition from Elymas – and this is where we get Saul's name change here – Paul, led by the Holy Spirit (“filled with the Holy Spirit”) calls down blindness on him. Exactly what happened to Saul when Jesus appeared to him and his whole life was turned around. That's pretty strong stuff. It's interesting that this is a sorcerer, a false prophet who does magic to fool people. God is using some magic on him now , but this isn't magic of an ordinary kind. This is a power that he knows nothing about. His power is way below the power of Jesus. God is showing those around who has the real power. It's important that they recognise who is Lord.

The proconsul believes – when “he sees what happened” but more importantly, “he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord”. It's the message about Jesus that the Holy Spirit helps him to understand and his spiritual eyes are opened. He believes because of the message about Jesus. And we're about to hear what Paul is teaching. So this teaching is important isn't it. The Holy Spirit sends Paul & Barney to preach, they preach the truth about Jesus. God's word. Again and again we see this expression “the word of God”. It plays a central

part in their lives. The Holy Spirit takes the word of God as it is preached and read and the Holy Spirit speaks into lives to give understanding.

You might be sitting here this morning and saying , “Dave, I don’t really understand God’s word. It’s too hard. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you understanding.”

One final question as we finish today. How did the Holy Spirit speak to the leaders in the church. Remember v. 2 – as they’re worshipping and fasting the Holy Spirit said. Hey hang on, What do you mean *he said*. Was it an audible voice? It could have been but I think it’s more likely that the Spirit spoke publicly through one or more of the prophets in the church. However, it is also possible that a conviction about God’s will in the situation was given to each one present.

After the attack on the school we taught in in Pakistan the school moved to Chiangmai in Thailand. After we had been there for 6 months planning was underway to plan for the next school year, would we stay in Thailand or go back to Pakistan? As George and I prayed about this I was thinking we’ve been at this school for 15 years the school needs our experience at this difficult time. But God put another thought in my mind. I want you to go back to Australia. I can sort it out Dave. I’ve got a few million other people I can call on to take your place. You need to take your family back to Australia. So I went to George. “George, I don’t know how to say this but I think God is telling us we need to go back to Australia and not stay with the school.”

George’s reply, “Oh, yes, I was aware of God saying that to me a week ago.”

The Holy Spirit spoke to both of us. Not audibly, but put a growing thought and conviction into our minds as we prayed. For me it involved a complete backflip on what I was thinking.

The fact remains we’d love to have an audible voice. See, when people say, “Why doesn’t God speak to me, God’s answer is that He has spoken. He’s spoken through His Son. He’s spoken

through His word. And I'm afraid that if we heard from God in an audible voice more often, then we would start to think that was the best way to hear from Him. Then we would eventually think that was the only way to hear from Him. And we would stop reading our Bibles. We would stop learning from the life of Jesus. And we would start putting all our faith into the next guy that comes along claiming to be getting direct messages from God.

The Holy Spirit wants to speak to us. Are we listening? Waiting?

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest who died in 1996, wrote a book about prayer called "With Open Hands" where he talked about how hard it is to let the Holy Spirit redirect us. At the end of the introduction, he included this prayer. I wonder how many of you could relate to this prayer:

Dear God,

I am so afraid to open my clenched fists!

Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to?

Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands?

Please help me to gradually open my hands

and to discover that I am not what I own,

but what you want to give me.

And what you want to give me is love—

unconditional, everlasting love. Amen.

Are we willing to open our hands to God in prayer, and receive what He so wants to give us?

I think it's really appropriate that we have a time of quiet now. Just you and God. Take one thought from today to him. Holy Spirit speak to me.