

Acts 14 Tregear sermon 1.11.2020 - Reminders of God's goodness

It's been raining almost all week hasn't it. It's funny how last year we were complaining about the lack of rain. Now we have an abundance of rain.

Many farmers have bumper crops this year because of the rain earlier in the year. But now there's a problem because they need to harvest the crop and they need dry weather for that. Which brings us round to the point. If only we could control the rain we could have much better lives couldn't we? Or would we?

You might have noticed that our passage today addresses this question of the rain. There are 2 key things I want us to draw out of our passage today.

1. God gives us **reminders of his goodness**, his kindness.
2. Luke gives us clues as to **what was important to the early church**.

In our passage today Paul and Barnabas go to three more towns - Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. There is the familiar pattern. Paul and Barnabas preach; many people believe and repent; then Jewish opposition comes; they get out of there or they get bashed up. So in Iconium they speak boldly; God confirms their message with signs and wonders; the city's divided, some for , some against; Paul & Barnabas get quickly out of there when they discover a plot to harm them and stone them to death.

Lystra, v.8 – they're preaching the good news about Jesus; a lame man who has never walked is healed. Everyone thinks that Paul and Barnabas must be gods; these are Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes; archaeologists have actually found a story recorded about gods who supposedly came to this area and the two people who welcomed them in got blessed; so the

people are on the lookout for more sightings. Paul & Barnabas are at their wits end to try and get these people to understand that they were not gods; they even ripped their clothes. We'll look at Paul's words in a minute. Then some Jews from Antioch and Iconium come on the scene – they've travelled 160kms to disrupt Paul and Barnabas. That's maybe 4 days travelling just to make things difficult for Paul and Barnabas. And these are Jews who should be telling others about the one true and living god – which is exactly what Paul and Barnabas are doing in v.15-17.

But no, these guys are so filled with hate, they would rather these pagans not hear about God as long as Paul and Barnabas are stopped. So the crowd turns on Paul and Barnabas and Paul gets stoned and left for dead outside of the city.

He revives, he's not dead, next day he's off to Derbe. Pretty boring there in v.21, Paul preaches, lots of people become followers of Jesus; don't know what happened to the Jewish opposition. Anyway, Paul & Barnabas backtrack and revisit all these places where they had been. Pretty brave to do that; definitely risk-taking behaviour.

Then they sail back to their home, Antioch, and report back to them everything that happened. They were away for about 2 years and the last thing we read in the chapter is that they stayed in Antioch for a long time, probably a few more years.

Ok back to Point One - 1. God gives us **reminders of his goodness**, his kindness. v.15-17

So, remember here Paul & Barnabas are talking to people who don't know the Old Testament. These are non-Jews. They don't know about all God's promises; they worship many gods. So what does Paul say to them?

- a) ***We're bringing you good news*** – This is same message that we've seen all through Acts. The message about Jesus is good news, because, as we saw last week, it brings freedom and forgiveness of sins.
- b) ***“turn from these worthless things to the living God*** – Paul doesn't say anything about prophecies, he doesn't quote from the Old Testament. But he addresses their gods, they are worthless things, they cannot do anything. And he says, Let me tell you about the living God. He doesn't mention repentance but he does say turn. And then he proceeds to tell them about the living God.
- c) ***He made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them*** - He's the creator, he made everything, even you and me.
- d) ***v.17 – he has not left himself without testimony*** – there are things that this living God has done and continues to do that testify to him, that help us to know him. and so he lists 4 things – reminders of God's goodness.
- e) ***He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy***. We, as humans, need rain. Somehow in our world today in our society there is this belief that everything just happened. All the intricate parts of our body, the variety of animals, the planets, the tides. Ok, just one “little” thing. The water cycle. The rain falls, we grow crops, flowers, we drink ourselves – we're totally dependent on the rain falling. It goes into rivers, goes into the seas,

evaporates, desalinates, and the cycle starts again. Paul reminds these Lystrans that this living God gives the rain. And then he makes the crops to grow. But he's also given us thousand and millions of varieties of crops. Did you know that there are more than 40,000 types of cultivated rice. If we included the wild varieties this would double. And this is just one crop! Ok I picked one where there are a lot of varieties. With spinach there's only about 100 different types. A bit boring isn't it? And God has given us seasons – we can grow different crops at different times.

And God provides us with all the food we need. With all these provisions we see something of God's character. He is a provider; God's goodness is shown and experienced by everyone; that's us; we get to enjoy the benefits of living in his creation. Richard Attenborough documentaries – great films – but it's always this evolved or this just happened to be here or they changed themselves. What! I reckon it takes far more faith to believe that all this just happened out of nothing than to believe that an all- powerful God made them.

f) **and lastly he fills our hearts with joy** – this is a reminder that God is a personal being – he has made us for relationship, with each other, and most importantly, with him. He has made us so that we experience joy. Yes, there is sorrow and pain – things that God never wanted in his world.

But this is the good news, that he has made a way for us to experience joy and forgiveness and true freedom through what Jesus did on the cross.

Now Paul doesn't get to this. It seems like his talk was cut short here. But I think he would have moved on to these things. But when you're having

morning tea this morning and it's inside because it's raining outside, just thank God for the rain and for everything else that are reminders of his goodness.

Ok, part 2 - Luke gives us clues as to **what was important to the early church**, What they did in the churches:

a) **there is an expectancy** – God is going to do things (v.3 – God confirms their message with signs and wonders) And then again in v.8. READ v.8-10. What's going on here? Paul “saw that he had faith to be healed”. Somehow the Holy Spirit is revealing to Paul, saying to Paul, tell this man to stand up. Now the most natural reaction would have been – “But, Lord, he's been a cripple since birth!” How can this happen? But, no, Paul goes ahead. Now there weren't lots of other people healed there. Luke doesn't say anything else. And in an hour or so Paul's going to be dragged out of the city and stoned. Paul is not killed but he's not rescued miraculously either. Should I be telling Louie or Shirley to get up and walk, throw away your walking stick or your walker? I would love to. God can do it. I don't know. But I want to have an expectancy that God can act? I want to be listening to God. Let's pray for each other in this respect

b) **strengthening the disciples** – how? More teaching about how God has already acted in history (Old Testament); stick close to Jesus

c) **encouraging them to remain true to the faith** – they would be tempted by those around them to go back to their old ways. Why be different? Come and be like everyone else. It's too hard to be following Jesus

d) **there will be hardships** – Paul doesn't water this down. This is the reality. We might not know the physical persecutions here in Australia that Christians in other countries have but there is the constant temptation and doubting of our society – What you believe in Jesus? That's old fashioned. No one believes that today. How will you get ahead in this world if you follow Jesus?

e) **elders in the church** – people who would be faithful and reliable leaders in the Christian community. People who would serve the people in the church

f) **prayer and fasting** – this comes up again. In our home group this week one of the things that a few of us asked prayer for was that we would pray constantly throughout each day for each activity we were involved in, not matter how insignificant it might be. It was an acknowledgement that every relationship, every activity, every moment of our day – we wanted to ask God for his strength, wisdom. Even buying the toilet paper, or deciding how to spend the evening, or what to say on the phone as we rang someone up to encourage them

g) **committed them to God** – v.23,26 – this is mentioned twice. In the end it is God who is working in each of us. Paul was saying here, the Holy Spirit is in you. God is working in you. I Thessalonians 2:13 - *And we also thank **God** continually because, when **you** received the word of **God**, which **you** heard from us, **you** accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually **is**, the word of **God**, which **is indeed at work in you** who believe.*

h) **reported all that God had done** – back in Antioch. Encourage each other by sharing what God has done in your life. At morning tea share what God is teaching you; how God strengthened you; report what God has done. It helps you to be thankful and it encourages others.

And the last thing is that a) God opens the doors. b) they stayed there a long time.

So two things here, yes it's God's work but we don't just sit back and do nothing. Paul and Barnabas stay a long time to strengthen the Antioch Christians; to encourage them to remain true to the faith; to pray and fast with them. There's work to do. All of us, if we are God's people. There is work to do. I don't have to have good knees to "strengthen others in the faith"; I might not be able to move around quickly but I can still encourage others to remain true the faith; we can't all be elders but we can pray and fast; and pray for your elders and leaders that they would remain faithful. And we can all be involved in committing ourselves and each other to God – trusting that God is able to do more than we could even imagine in each other's lives.

Today is International Day of prayer for persecuted Christians. Nic Ripken – *The Insanity of God* - worked in Somalia – saw many people killed when they became Christians. He went to Russia and China interviewed persecuted church. Here in this short video he meets secretly with a group of 150 Chinese Christians house church leaders. When he met the church leaders most of them had already served one three-year prison term. The ones who hadn't been in prison yet were expecting it anytime. They weren't seeking persecution but there was an attitude of calm acceptance as they waited for it.

So he's sharing the interviews that he had with these Chinese leaders. And the scene has been dramatised just to give us an impression of what it was like for Nic to be there.

from the film: 1:03:20 – 1:09:38 about the Chinese church

So when we become part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ what should we expect? I guess that for many of us, our expectations are just about as realistic as American tourist visiting the Giant's Causeway. We think that life in a church family like ours is going to be just awesomely amazingly loving and wholesome and straightforward all the time - after all - isn't this the *church? Don't we all love each other? Shouldn't MPC be like - well heaven on earth? Well, yes, and no!*

The Bible does tell us that the local church is the hope of the world - that it's here, in loving community that we can find encouragement, and support, and genuine care. Life in church can be brilliant! Life as the church of Jesus can be so exciting. But - and it's a very significant but - we can also expect life in church to be very, very messy, and sometimes, really hard going!

That's why these chapters in Acts are so important. They give us a really honest picture of what to expect of life in a church family like ours. Acts 14 and 15 show us what life will be like for us as we try to reach out into our community, and as we try to get along with each other.

This morning, rather than poring over the details of what happened in every place that these early missionaries visited, we're going to stand back and take in the grand sweep of events. And as we do that, some patterns that

God wants us to see will begin to emerge. So here's what to expect from people in our community who aren't yet Christians, and what to expect from our brothers and sisters as we serve Jesus together.

What to Expect from People Outside the Church Family?

How should we expect people in Mitchelton, and Keperra, and Everton Hills and Ferny Grove and Ashgrove and The Gap and every other suburb around us to react to us and the to the gospel?

We should expect some people to respond well (and ultimately become Christians), and some people to respond badly (perhaps even to hate us). For the church of Jesus Christ, this is *normal*.

It is perfectly normal to find some people who like us, and find other people who hate us. It is perfectly normal to find that sometimes things go swimmingly when we try to reach our city, and other times it's a real struggle. It's perfectly normal to find that some people love what we are doing, and other people who would have us banned in a moment if they got the chance. We shouldn't be surprised about this, *because it's always been like this and it always will be* for the church when we share the message of Jesus with people. That is the overarching message of Acts 13 and 14, and if we can learn this now, it will save us all manner of heartache later on!

Look with me at how Luke makes this really, really clear. The pattern is set at the end of the part of the Bible we looked at last week. Paul and Barnabas were in a place called Pisidian Antioch. Paul gave a great talk, and there was a very positive response: 13:42 says,

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath... On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

That's a pretty impressive response, isn't it? But read on -

⁴⁵ When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

Then Paul and Barnabas turned specifically to the Gentiles and,

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹ So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium.

So some responded positively, some responded negatively, and Paul and Barnabas got kicked out.

And what happens when they go to Iconium at the start of chapter 14?

Exactly the same thing - 14:1-2 -

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. ⁴ The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews,

others with the apostles. ⁵ There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶ But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷ where they continued to preach the gospel.

See the pattern?

In Lystra? The same thing. A man is healed in 14:8-10, which makes quite an impact. The rather clueless Lystrans hail Barnabas and Paul as the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes. Unlike Herod Antipas back in chapter 12, Paul and Barnabas aren't exactly comfortable with being called gods, and point the crowd to the real God (verses 16-17), but they are interrupted. In verse 19,

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. ²¹ They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

The pattern isn't hard to spot. Where the message of Jesus is explained, some people love it and some people hate it. That's just the way it is. We need to get used to that. That's why Paul and Barnabas tell the new Christians 'we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God'. Life as the church of Jesus Christ will never be a picnic. The apostles

said it. Jesus said it. Have you ever been puzzled by Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel when he says "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division!" Ever find that strange? Well I hope that in the light of Acts 14 it starts to make sense. Did Jesus come to make it possible for people like us to have peace with God and with God's people? Yes, of course he did. But as he does that, and as this message is explained, some people will embrace it and some will reject it. People will be divided into those who say 'Yes' and those who say 'No'. That's exactly what we see playing out before us in the book of Acts. This is *normal*. This is what we should expect.

That's what happened when we went to a pair of small churches beside Dublin Airport. The leadership was made up of 8 elders. There was no tradition of loving and teaching the Bible whatsoever. So when we started doing it, it came as a bit of a shock! Over the next 5 years, what happened? One of the elders who was a Christian grew and flourished. Another became a Christian, and went from strength to strength. Another left because he didn't like all the talk about forgiveness. And the others? Along with some friends outside the church, they spent five years trying to have the new minister removed. During that time, John Chapman from Sydney would regularly email us and say "Dear Gazza - please remember that they killed the Lord Jesus. We shouldn't expect anything better. PS the first 50 years are the hardest!"

Yes, there will be times when people think that the church is great, and our message gets a great reception. There will also be other times when our name is mud, and nobody wants to listen, and we even face active opposition. It's so important that we realise *that this is normal*. When things are going well, it's not because we are brilliant. When things are a real

struggle, it's not because we are rubbish. Of course, we need to keep examining ourselves, and measuring what we are doing against the Bible. Of course, we need to keep being creative, and pouring our energy into living together for Jesus as a shop window for him in our community. But the fact is that some people will love the message and others will hate it. Some people will love us, some people will hate us, some people will ignore us, and some people will actively seek to undermine us. This is all normal for the church of Jesus Christ according to Acts 14.

So do we need to change the way we think about the life of MPC?

It is possible that we expect far too little - according to this part of the Bible (and in fact all of the Bible), it is perfectly reasonable to expect that if we are doing all that we can to get the message of the gospel out into our community, and making sure that it is clearly explained here when people from the community join us, that there will be a steady flow of people becoming Christians. Not necessarily anything spectacular - although we'd love that - but steady, and real, and exciting. Do you expect too little right now?

Or you may expect too much. It is possible to slip into thinking that if we are nice, and respectful, and caring, then everyone in the community will love us, and think we are just such an unbelievable asset to the city. And yes, there may be moments like that, but there will also be times when people react very strongly to everything we believe and everything we are. We need to be ready for that too. That's the message of Acts 14.