

Acts 13:1-12

Church without walls

In Matthew 13:51-53 Jesus has an interesting challenge for his disciples. He has just been teaching them various things and then he asks: “Have you understood all these things?” “Yes”, they replied. “Well”, said Jesus, “Every teacher who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

I have really been enjoying our trip through Acts. Regardless of who has been preaching, I feel that I have been getting new treasures as well as old out of this particular part of God’s storeroom. One of the things which strikes me as Luke takes us on the journey of faith with these early followers of the Way is just how **ordinary** the men and women were who took the message of Christ out into the world.

At times they got it wrong. A classic case is at the start of Acts in Acts 1:6 where the disciples ask the risen Jesus:

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Even after the resurrection they are still thinking that Jesus might after all be an earthly king. And so they ask a question which John Calvin says has more misunderstandings in it than it has words.

It didn’t seem like a promising start. How on earth would they fulfil Christ’s mandate to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, spreading out into Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth?

There are many different answers to that question, but it is certainly true to say that God was at work in the lives of many individuals and bringing them together as his body, bringing them together to build his church. We can see this so clearly as we look at the church at Antioch in **Acts 13**. The church here

had a team ministry long before the Church of Scotland came up with the idea!

There were 5 men who were leading the church in Antioch, 5 resident prophets and teachers.

Luke does not explain what the difference was between a prophet and a teacher, nor whether all 5 fulfilled both functions. But he does give us interesting details about all 5.

First of all there was **Barnabas**. We have already met him in the story of the growing early church.

- 4:36, 37 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. Barnabas is right in there from the start, showing his commitment to the Lord with his wallet.
- In 9:27 we find that the disciples were afraid to let Saul join them because up to that point he had been the leading persecutor of the church. It was Barnabas who brought Saul to the apostles,

explaining the great change which had come about in Saul's life

- In chapter 11 from verse 19 we find that the believers have been scattered by the persecution. Some went to Antioch spreading the good news about Jesus, but only to the Jews. Others were telling Gentiles also. The church in Jerusalem heard that many people including Gentiles were turning to God and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. He was a man who was trusted by the church leaders to go and deal with a new and potentially difficult situation.
- Verse 24 gives God's verdict on this man: He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.
- Barnabas then went to Tarsus to look for Saul and returned with him to Antioch. For a whole year they taught great numbers of people and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch, to begin

with as a kind of joke; they were indeed Christ's ones. But the name stuck.

- In the lead up to this evening's story Barnabas and Saul had travelled to Jerusalem. The church had been warned about an impending famine and had collected money for the believers in Judea. Who better to take it than these two trusted servants?

Notice what a mixed bunch these church leaders were:

Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus

Simeon (a Hebrew name) called Niger which means black who presumably came from Africa and may even have been Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross for Jesus;

Lucius of Cyrene definitely came from North Africa;

Manaen, who had been brought up with King Herod

Saul from Tarsus

If we think of the Gospel spreading out from Jerusalem, the church here in Antioch is

north. The leaders have their roots in the west (Cyprus), the south west (Cyrene is in North Africa), in the north (Tarsus was near Antioch); and most fascinatingly, Manaen was brought up in Herod's royal court, (that's the same Herod who had James the brother of John executed at the start of chapter 12) a place which most Jews and indeed most Christians would have seen as the gates of hell. But God is at work, calling people together from vastly different cultures and backgrounds. Today it is the same. God does not limit his work to particular races or classes of people; the gospel is for all.

Here we see a church doing what they should be doing (verse 2);

- Worshipping, giving God his rightful place
- Fasting, saying to God that they take seriously his claim on their lives
- Open to the Holy Spirit

And it's at this moment that the Holy Spirit gives direct guidance:

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”

This is a critical moment in the church's history, so let's look at it in more detail.

First of all, the revelation seems a bit vague. Could the Holy Spirit not have given them a list of places to visit, even drawn a map to make sure they didn't get lost on the way? Perhaps. But that is not the way God works. When God spoke to Abram way back in Genesis 12:1 he said:

“Go to the land I will show you.”

Like Barnabas and Saul, Abram had to set off not knowing where he was to go.

Responding to God's call is a great step of faith. As we noticed when we looked at Hebrews 11, God does not guide us from A to Z in one go; he leads us from A to B, step by step in faith.

At the beginning I was talking about new and old things. One of the new things I have

appreciated looking at Acts this time round is the uncertainty that faced these early believers. They were prepared to take risks and that meant that they sometimes got it wrong, as we will continue to see; but they stepped out in faith

Secondly, how did God reveal his plan? It may have been through one of the prophets; equally, it could have been a growing inner conviction in their hearts and minds. What we do know is that their first reaction was to fast and pray, partly I think to be sure that this was God's call and not just some idea of their own, and partly to pray for the 2 who were being sent out.

Notice the role of **fasting** in all this. In verse 2 the believers were fasting and worshipping, in verse 3 they respond to God's call by praying and fasting. Fasting is not usually an end in itself. It is a negative action (doing without food or perhaps some other distraction) for the sake of a positive action (worshipping or praying). I'm quite

sure that these believers enjoyed their food as much as you and I do. By fasting they were saying that they were serious about their worship and their prayer.

Thirdly, notice the role of the church in all this. It is the church which sends them out, directed by the Holy Spirit and when they return (14:27), the first thing they do is to gather the church together and report all that God has been doing through them on their mission.

When we seek God's guidance, thinking here especially of our role in the church, there are **2 dangers to avoid**. The first is the individual who claims direct personal guidance by the Spirit without any reference to the church. God can of course guide in any way he chooses (Paul himself in an exceptional moment was guided by God in a dream). But I can remember a moment when as an 18 year old I decided to take a course of action and announced that it was God's will, only to have it gently pointed out to me

by a wiser and older Christian that none of us has a monopoly on the will of God.

On the other hand there is a danger, especially in bigger churches like the Church of Scotland, that nothing can be done unless approved by a church committee somewhere, and the Holy Spirit is stifled by our institution.

As John Stott writes:

“Still today it is the responsibility of the local church (and especially of its leaders) to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, in order to discover who he may be gifting and calling”

The church has a responsibility to identify and release your abilities to serve God.

There is also a responsibility on the individual Christian to discover God's will for their lives. We looked at this last year in *The Purpose Driven Life*. Here is a quick summary. Rick Warren taught us to work out our SHAPE, later refined to EHAPS (not as memorable, but perhaps more useful).

Experience

You have been moulded by your experiences in life – family, educational, vocational, spiritual, ministry/service and painful experiences. For God to use your experiences, even the painful ones, you must be willing to share them.

Heart

Your heart is your passion – what you love to do and what you care about most. It's the real you, not what others think of you or what your circumstances are. The Bible tells us to serve the Lord with all our heart. God wants us to serve him with passion, enthusiasm. God wants you to use your natural interests to serve him and others. Listening for inner promptings can point to the ministry God intends you to have.

Abilities

Your abilities are given to you by God at birth. Every one of them can be used in God's service. The New Testament is clear that there is no such thing as a person without abilities. God has a place in his

church where your particular abilities can shine and where you can make a difference. It is partly up to you to find that place.

Personality

God loves variety! Just look at the different personalities around you. There are introverts and extroverts, people who work well on their own and team players, optimists and pessimists etc. Look at the people God used in the Bible; Paul the intellectual, Peter the impulsive, Jeremiah the melancholy, Lydia the business woman. Your personality will affect how and where you use your abilities

Spiritual gifts

We all have spiritual gifts, but nobody has all the gifts. If you had them all, that would defeat God's purpose in giving them in the first place. God wants us to love and depend on each other.

Rick Warren's advice to all of us is; start finding out and clarifying what God wants

you to do. (I recommend *The Purpose Driven Life*, both the book and the website).

Let us look very briefly at what happened at the start of what we now call Paul's first missionary journey

In verses 4 and 5 we watch the 2 men, sent on their way, not sure what exactly God's plan was, but following what they knew was right. They set out ... set sail ... proclaimed the word of God ... they kept following what they did know of God's will and they waited to see what God would do next. You and I may not know exactly what God is planning for our future lives, but we all know there are things we must be doing just now; if we live out our lives in obedience to God's call now, we can be sure that the experiences we have will be preparing us for whatever lies ahead. God may have different plans for our futures, but he is "shaping" us right now for what lies ahead.

What lay ahead for Barnabas, Saul and John Mark whom they had brought with them from Jerusalem was an encounter with a Jewish sorcerer and a Roman proconsul called Sergius Paulus – Paul to his friends. The proconsul was intelligent, we are told in verse 7, and also a man with an obvious spiritual hunger. We can imagine how keen Barnabas and Saul were to respond when they were invited to share the good news about Jesus.

But the sorcerer, called Bar-Jesus or Elymas, saw that his prestige and livelihood were under threat and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

There is a little aside in **verse 9** which would be easy to miss

Saul, who was also called Paul

A lot of Jews living in Gentile cultures had their original Jewish name and a Roman name as well. John Mark is a good example. This does not seem to be the case with Paul.

He went from being called Saul all the time to being called Paul. Why?

There are **3 possible reasons**:

- Saul is a Jewish name, Paul is a Roman name. Paul is perhaps more keenly aware that God is calling him to bring the good news to Roman listeners. He wants to identify with his listeners. He wants perhaps to copy in some small measure the example of Jesus who in his birth identified with us and took on him a human name. Paul does not want to speak down to his listeners, but rather to address them as an equal.
- Secondly, the change of name is a memorial of victory. Paul set off on this journey sent by the Holy Spirit. But no doubt also, to use his own phrase as he arrived in Corinth, he came “in weakness and fear and with much trembling”. But here he has seen God at work, confirmation that God

can change lives; a first Gentile convert. And so Paul takes on the name of the convert.

- Thirdly, there is the meaning of the word Paul; it means little. Paul was the one who said he was least of all the apostles, because he had persecuted the church. He may also have been a small man, which might explain why his enemies said that in his letters he was strong but in body he was weak. Whichever thing Paul had in mind, it is clear throughout his life that he was a man of humility; a man who at times felt amazed at the heights of the ministry to which God had called him compared to his own unworthiness for the task.

But to return to our story. Paul confronts the sorcerer very directly and says in effect: “So your name is Bar-Jesus, as if you were a child of Jesus? In fact you are a child of the

devil and an enemy of everything that is right.”

God’s judgement on this man was fitting. His spiritual darkness was now matched by a temporary physical darkness as he groped around depending on others to help him.

And the result of this?

When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed (shaken to the core) at the teaching about the Lord.

What astonished him was the combination of word and sign, of the teaching and the miraculous defeat of the sorcerer.

It was the same combination of miracles and teaching which had drawn people to Jesus.

As God’s kingdom broke through into first century Palestine, people were amazed at Jesus’ authority both in his teaching and in the signs which backed up his astonishing claims.

What the world needs is the same now as it was then. The world needs to hear the

amazing, authoritative teaching of Jesus, which still has the same power today as it did 2000 years ago; and the world needs to see that power in the miracle of changed lives.