

Sending a Clear Message

Acts 13:26-52 | July 5, 2020

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Today the narrative moves from Jerusalem back to Asia Minor, the Greek speaking part of the Roman Empire. Remember that Barnabas had brought Saul to Antioch to help with teaching the Gentile converts about the Jewish faith and about Jesus, the Messiah. They've been teaching for over a year by now and the church is growing.

Cultural Diversity

As our series title implies, the gospel has begun to spread like a virus. International travellers from Jerusalem, Jewish Christians fleeing persecution, have begun to infect the Jewish community in Antioch with the gospel. Then some non-Jewish Christians have started speaking to the Greeks as well.

So by the time of these events the Church at Antioch was filled with a whole range of ethnic backgrounds. Look at the list of the prophets and teachers in the Church at the start of the chapter. There was Barnabas who's described in ch4 as a Levite from Cyprus. There's Simeon who was called Niger, that is, black, so probably from Africa. He may even have been the Simon of Cyrene who was made to carry the cross for Jesus. There's also Lucius of Cyrene, a city in the north east of modern day Libya. Then there was Manaen who's said to be a member of the court of Herod, so clearly an Israelite. And finally there was Saul who came from Tarsus, again a Greek outpost. So the leaders of the church indicate a fairly diverse congregation at Antioch.

So it's growing, it has a wide cultural and ethnic diversity and things are going well. But now God steps in to make sure that the kingdom grows even faster. God's Spirit comes to the Christians in Antioch and instructs them to send out Saul and Barnabas for the specific ministry of sharing the gospel with the wider world.

A Context of Prayer

Notice the context in which this call of Saul and Barnabas comes. We saw last week the importance the church placed on prayer in the midst of opposition and we find the same here. The church is worshipping the Lord and fasting. They've removed distractions from their minds and opened their hearts to the Lord's direction.

I wonder whether we have that sort of attitude when we come together for worship. Do we come with minds and hearts open to be led by the Holy Spirit, perhaps even to be led in uncomfortable directions, personally or as a church? Or are we just doing it because we've always done it, or because it's the right thing to do. Is that harder to do when you're somewhat disconnected watching this in cyberspace?

Well they're ready to act, but first they spend some more time in prayer and fasting, perhaps to assure themselves of God's call and also, no doubt, asking for God's guidance and protection for Saul and Barnabas. Then after praying and fasting they send Saul and Barnabas out from them.

The Cost of Mission

Now I want you to think about this decision to send Paul and Barnabas. It's a costly decision isn't it? These two have played a vital role in the growth of this church. They're highly gifted. Barnabas is mentioned back in ch4 as being a leader in the generosity shown by the early church to their poorer members. He's called Barnabas because he has such a gift of encouragement. That may even be why he was sent here when the Jerusalem church heard about Gentiles being converted. Saul's credentials we know well. He'd been brought here to teach the new converts and you can imagine that there's plenty more to do. So he's a huge loss.

But God had a wider world in mind. He'd chosen Saul specifically to take the gospel to the Gentile world. Back in ch 9:15 God says: "15he is an instrument whom I have chosen, to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." And that's what he'll be doing by the end of the passage, as the Jewish leaders reject his message. It's a costly decision but one that God will use to great effect.

So what do they do? Well, they begin in Cyprus, where Barnabas comes from, taking with them John Mark, a relative of Barnabas who acts as an assistant to them. And as they begin to tell people about Jesus we find a number of principles that might be helpful for us in sharing the gospel with people?

Proclaiming the word of God(v.5)

Being Jews, the first place they go is to the local synagogues. And notice what they do there: "They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews." (v.5) Their first approach was to proclaim God's word. The Old

Testament looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, so with Jews this was the logical place to start. That might not work for us since our hearers will probably have little knowledge, if any, of God's word but the point is that they begin with what God has revealed about himself already. Later they go on to what's happened in Jerusalem, but their first point of reference is God's revelation of himself.

Demonstrating God's Power

But they don't just use words. As we discover in the next encounter, they also demonstrate the truth of what they're saying by the things they do. As they're passing through the island they come across a magician named Bar-Jesus. He's a magician who's been hanging around the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, no doubt for monetary gain. So he has an interest in stopping him from being converted. Well, Saul isn't going to let a magician stand in his way. First he points out that what he's doing is "making crooked the straight paths of the Lord." And then he shows where true power lies. Elymas is struck blind for a time and the onlookers are amazed at this demonstration, not of magic, but of the power of God that accompanies the preaching of the gospel.

Now it seems to me that this situation isn't so much different from what we face today if we're sharing the gospel with people. People will oppose us for similar reasons to Elymas. That is, because the gospel threatens their livelihood, or their comfortable lifestyle, or their status among their friends. They'll use various methods to oppose us: that is by trying to undermine our message in the minds of our listeners. Or they'll try to manipulate us to tone down the message. They'll try to make out that the message of the gospel is just our opinion. Then they'll try to make us feel guilty for foisting our opinions on others when others' opinions are just as valid.

But what we see here is that this isn't just about opinions. This is a message that God has sent to all people; to those whom he's created. And he shows it's a message from him by backing it up with results. Now I'm not suggesting that we ask God to strike people blind. I'm not sure that'd be a good thing to do in our particular cultural setting, though it might be in other cultures around the world. But we can point to how God works in a real way, in our lives and in the lives of Christians we know, to do amazing things. We can point out the fallacy of believing that any worldview is valid as long as you believe it sincerely. We can point out the emptiness of secular philosophies of life, of their inability to deal with the real issues of life in this world; but always with the hope that

they'll see not our wisdom or cleverness, but the power of God that comes through the message of the gospel.

Showing how God has worked in the past

When Paul and his companions come to Antioch in Pisidia we get an expanded version of the way they preach the gospel. This may be similar to what they did in Cyprus, expounding the word of God, but here we get perhaps a better idea of just how they went about it. Here we discover they're not just expounding the Bible. They're actually recounting the way God has acted over the history of Israel to bring about the salvation of his people.

They begin with God's choosing of Abraham, then the formation of the nation in Egypt and the Exodus. They move from the settling of Canaan, through the appointment of King Saul, to David, the greatest of Israel's Kings, a man after God's own heart.

Now up until this point none of this would have been new. The congregation would all have been nodding their heads, thinking how great it was to have this very knowledgeable speaker from Jerusalem visiting their little synagogue. But then Paul drops the bombshell. God has now brought one of David's descendants to Israel as a saviour, just as he promised. He's given testimony to him by the preaching of John the Baptist. No doubt they all would have heard of John. Then he goes on to recount the events of Jesus' crucifixion: his death, his burial and his resurrection. For these Jewish believers the good news is this: what God had promised has now been fulfilled. Jesus is alive. Through him "forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; ³⁹by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the Law of Moses." And then he gives them a warning that they not fall into the trap foretold by the prophets, of hearing the good news but rejecting it.

Connecting with peoples' own story

Now notice how Paul moves in that speech, from God's word, from the record of what God has done for them, to their own story, to the events of their own day. His proclamation of the gospel requires them to get the connection between God's story and their story, between ancient history and current events. Of course in their case current events were very closely connected with God's story. But this is a principle that we need to have clear in our minds. It's no use just talking about what God has done in the past. For most people

today anything that happened before March 22nd [Covid-19 restrictions in Australia] is ancient history. But neither is it enough to just talk about people's own history. We're already self-centred enough without reinforcing the tendency. What's more if we just work from people's own world they'll struggle to find the resources to cope with that world as it really is. No, we need to make a connection between what God has done in the past and is doing right now, and the situation that people find themselves in today. We need to tell them of the freedom from guilt God offers us through Jesus' death and resurrection and of his promise to be with us in all the struggles of life.

In some cases of course that may mean starting from scratch as far as talking to others about what God has done. As I said, you can generally assume a zero knowledge base about Christian things among the vast majority of people. So that means that we need to temper some of this with wisdom about where to start with people. In fact when we get to Acts 17 we'll see that Paul takes a quite different approach with the people of Athens whose knowledge of the Jewish faith would have been limited. But as he does there, we need to connect people's own stories with the story of God's work in the world.

Acting According to Gospel Principles

Notice what happens when the Jewish leaders reject Paul's message, basically out of jealousy. He and Barnabas see their rejection as a sign that it's time to take the gospel to the Gentiles. They say: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Is 49:6). In the face of this opposition they continue to act with integrity and according to gospel principles. The gospel is a message that was always intended for all people. God's desire was that the Jewish people would be the agents for taking that message to the world, but if this part of the Jewish people refuses to do that then Paul and Barnabas will do it themselves. And as a result the Gentiles are brought into the people of God and we read: "⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region."

Expecting Different Responses

It's interesting to think about the different responses to the preaching of the gospel. Some like Elymas oppose it for financial reasons. It affects their livelihood, or their personal self-interest in some way; perhaps it threatens their particular lifestyle. The devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city – the establishment types, clearly don't want their settled social order disturbed. In the case of the leaders of the Jews, Barnabas' and Paul's popularity was a challenge to their authority and power so they were jealous.

On the other hand for some the gospel is irresistible. Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, is amazed, not just by Saul's exercise of power over Elymas, but he's equally astonished, we're told, at the teaching about the Lord, as a result of which he believes.

When they get to Pisidian Antioch, we read, the people at the synagogue "urged them to speak about these things again the next Sabbath. ⁴³When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God."

Similarly, the following week, as they again preach the gospel and, in particular, highlight the fact that the gospel is intended for Gentiles as much as for Jews, there's great joy among the Gentile listeners that God's grace has been poured out on them.

Sadly in Australia there appears to be a degree of herd immunity to the gospel. But that mustn't deter us from seeking out those who will receive the gospel with joy and excitement. This is a message of freedom for people who are bowed down by the pressures of life and that comes accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit to change hearts.

So let's boldly proclaim God's message of freedom and forgiveness, connecting what God has done with people's own stories, always trusting in the Spirit's power to change people's hearts.