

Viral – Good New Spread Fast- Acts 11-18

#1 Gospel Ground Zero – Acts 11:19-26

What do Acts chapter 11 and current global events **have in common**?

1. Firstly, there's a common theme of **community transmission**, and
2. Secondly, there's a common theme of **dealing with difference**



Now I'm aware on both fronts that I could be accused of taking advantage of two quite painful realities for the sake of a sermon series. That's especially true of the title of the series: **Viral**. I don't wish to amplify anyone's suffering or loss.

I'm also aware that there's some irony in the title, after all, some people lampoon Christianity as if the Church is a **pandemic** that should be **eradicated**!

Yet, it's difficult to read Acts chapters 11-18 in the New Testament of our Bibles without noting:

- the **rapid spread** of the Gospel to the nations, and
- the overcoming of significant **hurdles** of historical **hurt** and **hatred**

As we begin the series, let's look at the launch pad for the community transmission of the Gospel of Jesus in the 1st Century AD as it is described in **Acts 11:19-21...**

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a **great number became believers** and turned to the Lord.

Good News Travels Fast

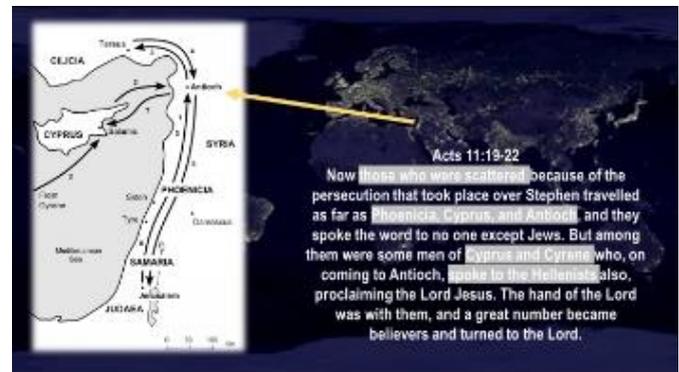
Note how the good news of Jesus spread **fast**, and in an **unexpected** way.

The **first people** to become followers of Jesus **en masse** were **Jewish** people, some who lived in Jerusalem, but many who had travelled from **far flung places** across the Roman Empire for the Festival of Pentecost.¹

When a severe persecution broke out against followers of Jesus in Jerusalem,² some of it perpetrated by none other than Saul of Tarsus, many fled to their homes far away for safety.³ And, of course, **they took with them**, in their hearts, the testimony that Jesus was the Lord and Saviour of the world – the Good news of the **Gospel**.

One of those cities was **Antioch** in ancient Syria to the north on the Orontes River.⁴ It was then, the **third greatest city** in the Roman Empire.

Most significantly, this city was a great **multicultural hub** representing **all the world's nationalities**.



Many of those fleeing the persecution in Jerusalem only spoke with their Jewish neighbours on returning to Antioch. But in Acts 11:20 we see that some of them on the way through Antioch to their homelands **shared their testimony about** Jesus with (what the Bible refers to as) **“Hellenists”**.

In those times, the term **“Hellenist”** or **“Greek”** or **“Gentile”**, from a Jewish point of view, referred to anyone who was not part of the Jewish race or religion; their **culture and language** was that of the ancient Greek world.

I like to think of Antioch as **“Gospel ground zero”** – because it there that a whole bunch of **“Gentiles”** became Christians through the testimony of others - people from **many backgrounds and nationalities**.⁵

¹ Acts 2:5, known as the great Diaspora, that is, dispersion of Jews across the empire after years of persecution in Palestine

² Read Acts 7 and 8

³ Read Acts 9 for Saul's back story

⁴ Now Antakya in South-central Turkey not far from the Syrian border

⁵ The story of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 is the true ground zero for Gentiles becoming Christians.

Luke, the writer of Acts, tells us in verse 21,

“The hand of the Lord was with them, and a **great number became believers** and turned to the Lord.”

Good news travels fast.

Last week all people in Victoria were waiting with bated breath, desperate to hear whether a **young boy lost in thick bush** on Mount Disappointment would be saved from freezing conditions.

When the news broke that after 47 hours, the autistic teenager William Cavanagh had been found, the **good news travelled fast** to every electronic device in the State in an instant – and the news was celebrated with great joy!



"Everyone's heart's exploded with joy," one SES volunteer was heard to say when the news broke among the searchers.

Good news of what media called “a miracle” spread rapidly and passed on from one Victorian to another – especially the story that police and SES officers had played the **theme music from *Thomas the Tank engine*** to attract the boy’s attention! **The good news went viral and global from there.**

Our passage from Acts chapter 11 has that similar sense of **rapid transmission** and **great joy** - but in this case, the news was that **God’s love and salvation** had come to earth for **all people** in Jesus Christ.



Dealing with Difference

It’s the “all people” part of that equation that leads us to the second theme common to both Acts 11 and today’s current affairs – the theme of **dealing with difference and division.**

From verse 22 of Acts 11 we read...

22 News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'.

As we'll see in the coming chapters of Acts in this sermon series, Jesus' first followers (Jewish people) in Jerusalem **could not believe their ears!** Gentiles were being welcomed by God and were receiving the same blessing of the Holy Spirit as Jewish people received!⁶ This was unheard of and unexpected by Jerusalem Church.

Barnabas, who is introduced earlier in Acts⁷, was a Jewish follower of Jesus who originally came from Cyprus. He was a man of **generous encouragement**. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, tells us this envoy was sent to investigate the news from Antioch. It made sense to send someone familiar with the region, language and culture. And yet, a significant motive lying behind the move to send Barnabas from Jerusalem was curiosity and suspicion - had the **enemies** of the Jewish people really **become Christ-people, or Christ-ians?**

Have you ever wondered why the Bible depicts a division and even a dislike of Gentiles by Jewish people in 1st Century Judea?⁸ as having such a **big problem with so-called "Gentiles"**. We know that Jews and Samaritans had historical conflicts and deep-seated enmity.⁹ But what's the deal between Jewish people of the 1st Century and "Greeks"? There's a **big back story associated** with the racial and cultural divisions between them.

Part of that story is associated with the name from which the great city near the mouth of the Orontes derived its name.

⁶ See Acts 10:45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles

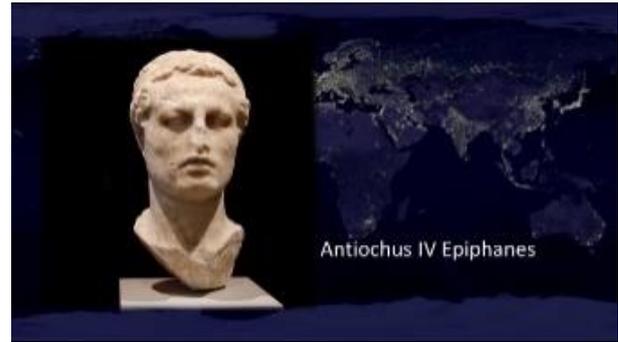
⁷ Acts 4:36-37

⁸ E.g. Matthew 5:47

⁹ E.g. John 4:9

Antiochus IV Epiphanes was a Hellenistic king of the Seleucid Empire from 175 BC until his death in 164 BC. a son of King Antiochus III the Great.

His name at birth was Mithradates, but he assumed the name that means “God Manifest” after he ascended the throne, giving us some connotations about his rule.



Among his many barbarous exploits was the **intense persecution of Jews** in Judea and Samaria, including the massacre during the famous rebellion of the Jewish **Maccabees**.¹⁰

Antiochus IV sought to wipe out Judaism from the earth. He burned their Scriptures, sacrificed pigs in their temples, moved them on to other locations and systematically tried to dismantle their culture and worship.

This history affected the way Jewish people of the 1st Century AD regarded Greeks or Gentiles, no less because they were still being marginalized by the Gentiles of their time. So, the idea that **Gentiles could be included** in the plans and good favour of God was not part of the mindset of the early Jerusalem church, it was **unthinkable!**

Despite knowing that God’s plan has always been to include people of all nations in His plan of salvation as we see in both Old Testament prophecies and promises and New Testament proclamation¹¹, the inclusion of Gentiles was obscured for most 1st Century Jews by a huge wall of **historical hostility**.¹²

Healing our historical hurts

Our news reports today are filled with images of people **dealing with historical differences**.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maccabean_Revolt

¹¹ E.g. Matthew 12:21. In John 12:20-26 his disciples ask Jesus whether he would welcome non-Jewish people to speak with him. Jesus says in verses 26, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.” See too Simeon’s unusual, but biblical faith in Luke 2:22

¹² Note how Ephesians 2:11-22 pictures the impact of the cross of Christ on these relationships

Lest we see the Gospel of Jesus as merely a means for personal religious piety, or only a form of personal assurance of salvation, we should realize that the Bible depicts the good news of Jesus death for sin as bringing God’s shalom and reconciliation to all the peoples of the earth.



As Ephesians declares, “He is our peace”, and Paul declares in 2 Corinthians that Christians are “ambassadors” of reconciliation.¹³

That shalom and reconciliation requires of the people that wouldn’t normally get along to find the means of grace from God to become one in a new shared identity through faith in Christ.¹⁴

Conclusion

So, the connections between our world today and our reading of Acts chapter 11 show two areas of **common ground** –

- the Good news of Jesus **spread rapidly** in the ancient world, and in part this was because
- ...it was a cure for deep-seated historical hostilities bringing **shalom/peace and reconciliation** in the place of difference



It’s common for Christians today to wonder what relevance the Gospel of Jesus has to one’s neighbour. And yet, right before our eyes in Jesus is **the great reconciler**, the **prince of peace**, the **maker of a new humanity of harmony**.

Perhaps then, the Church’s **manner of mission must change**. If our presentation of our faith truly showed that Jesus is the way of peace and reconciliation, the good news of Jesus would indeed spread rapidly across the world.

¹³ Eph. 2:14, 2 Cor. 5:18

¹⁴ Eph. 2:15

Imagine the world lighting up with stories of people **reconciling differences** because of the work of the Spirit of God in their lives.

Of course, it would require of every Christian to prayerfully **seek reconciliation** and **peace** and to **share the same** with everyone.

