

Acts 13:1-12

As you may know I have four large oak trees in my garden and despite my greatest efforts in the autumn the leaves and acorns fall mainly into my garden and not Ralph's next door! The result is come the following spring I find loads of little oaks beginning to grow, which is always surprising as we struggle to get much else to grow in our garden. Without a bit of judicious weeding I think I might have my own mini forest. The spread of the oak trees is actually pretty amazing.

Today we begin a short series from Acts as we look at the spread of the Christian church and we see the seeds of the gospel being scattered across Asia Minor and Greece and little churches sprouting up as Paul and others brought the gospel message to them and as the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" begins to be fulfilled.

Today indeed the gospel has reached the ends of the earth and there are few nations on earth where there is not an open and active missionary church. What we see in these chapters of Acts that we will look at for the next few weeks is how that spread began.

As we read Acts we see that following the death of Stephen in Acts 7 there was a persecution which caused the church to spread from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria to this northern city of Antioch which was to become the mission centre for the Christian church.

1. sent off v1-3

It began with God stirring his church there to send out Barnabas and Saul. While they were meeting together the Holy Spirit inspired them to send out these two.

I suppose we don't always understand the full implications of our actions do we? We had a wedding here in church yesterday and the full implications of the promises made there will only become clear in years ahead. Many of us are blessed with children but as you first hold the little bundle in your arms you cannot know all the implications of bringing a child into the world.

As the church in Antioch responded to God's initiative and sent Barnabas and Saul out I should imagine they had little idea of the incredible spread of the gospel that would result.

But we note that this new stage of the mission of the church began by God calling faithful people to his service. We see this don't we through Scripture, Abraham, Moses, the prophets all in their day were sent out by God as part of his salvation purposes and now these two were "sent off". That is the church discerning the moving of the Holy Spirit released them from their service in the church to go out with the gospel message. In our own day we too are sent out with the gospel message. Often at the end of the Communion service we will say the words, "Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory." However, alongside that general sending of all of us to live and speak the gospel we too as a church need to be sensitive to God the Holy Spirit for when he

specifically calls people from here to some area of ministry be it overseas or in this country. The spread of the gospel happened then and happens now as God calls and sends out his people.

2. The word proclaimed v4-5

The journey took them from Antioch down to the port of Seleucia and then across to Cyprus where they landed at Salamis. I hope over the next weeks we will be able to see the geographical progress of Paul and others as well as considering the spiritual progress of the church.

Why Cyprus, well it may have been because Barnabas came from there and certainly in this opening passage it is he who is mentioned first though you'll note by v13 he is relegated to the group with Paul and from there on it is definitely "Paul's Missionary Journey"!

But they came to Cyprus in the power of the Holy Spirit v4 and preaching the word of God in the Jewish synagogues v5. They went to the synagogues because it was God's will that the gospel be brought first to the Jews (Ro 1:16) but also because there they knew they would find not just Jews but those who were interested in God and as such these places offered them the possibility of new converts. There they preached the word of God. That was it and that is what we are still called to do if we would see the church grow in our day – preach the word. They had a confidence in the word of God as we are reminded by Paul in Rom 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

We in our own day need to rediscover that confidence in the power of the word of God. This week sadly saw the death of Rev John Stott, who in many ways was the father of the Evangelical movement within the Church of England. In his obituary in the Telegraph it said "Stott was never prepared to compromise on the priority of Biblical revelation". His aim throughout his ministry was to help people understand and believe the Bible because he knew it as the word of God and that word has great power. So for us in growing our own lives with God and in helping our friends to faith we need to trust in the power of God through his word. The church grows as the word is preached.

3. Interest and opposition v6-8

Proclaiming the word they did an island tour from Salamis in the East down to Paphos in the west, which today is a popular holiday destination. There they met Sergius Paulus who was the Roman Proconsul. We see in v7 that he was interested in what Saul and Barnabas had to say and he "wanted to hear the word of God" again a reminder of what we have seen in Lifeshapes of looking for "the person of peace". Here was a man who was open to the gospel and a man who was described as "intelligent" so it isn't a matter of leaving your brain behind if you want to follow Jesus. However along with Sergius Paulus was his attendant Elymas who most certainly was not a person of peace. V8 he was opposed to the gospel and he "tried to turn the proconsul from the faith".

Perhaps he saw these missionaries as a threat to his livelihood and influence. So he tried to put Sergius Paulus off. What we see here is a spiritual battle, one which would go on throughout Paul's ministry often with painful consequences for Paul and others, and which continues today. As Paul put it in Eph 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms".

Here was the battle with Sergius Paulus interested and Elymas doing his best to dissuade him from this new faith. We too as we share the gospel can expect to find people who are interested and to find others who will strongly oppose the gospel. I certainly have found this in the past. I can remember a man I met when I did his father's funeral who was clearly interested in the Christian faith. He came along to Xnty Explained but shared with me that his wife wasn't keen on him coming and eventually he dropped out and while I kept in contact with him he never came to anything at church again. Then I can remember a woman who was a Christian and whose husband was strongly opposed to her faith and all but banned her from coming to church. The path of the gospel is not always smooth but see that as Barnabas and Saul, or Paul as his named is changed to here, shared the gospel it brought about a response.

4. The power of God v9-12

Faced with opposition Paul called a spade a spade. He denounced Elymas as "a child of the devil". That was who was really causing the problems, the devil. Then for a while he blinded him, v11 "you will be unable to see the sun". It wouldn't be much of a problem in England of course but in Cyprus... Paul acted in the power of God to remove the opposition so that the light of the gospel of Christ might shine in the hearts of those God was saving. Here we see God's power. However here we also see a danger. What happened here was unusual and it is dangerous to make doctrine out of history. We can't say that because Paul stood up and made this man blind that the next time you or I find someone opposing the gospel we call on God to blind them. However, we can see some principles here. We see that when the gospel is preached there will come both interest and opposition. We can also see that we need to recognise that we are in a spiritual battle. We can also see that we do need sometimes to be prepared to speak plainly to those who are opposing the gospel to help them recognise the consequences of their actions and then sometimes to metaphorically wipe the dust off our feet as we move away from them and towards those who are open to the message of God's grace.

So the power of God was shown but not just in making Elymas blind but also v12 in Sergius Paulus coming to faith. The gospel spread had begun, a little seedling had been planted.

Friends we continue in that line of the gospel in our day. We are aware that the church in England is struggling. We are aware that numbers are declining and that even at the recent meeting of the general Synod of the Church of England one speaker warned that the C of E could well not “be functionally extant” in 20 years time. I don’t know whether that is true or not. However I do know that people in every age receive the gospel baton and are called to preach the word as the way of growing the church. We in our day need to hear and respond to that. We need to be asking God to show us those he is setting apart in our congregation for specific roles in terms of gospel ministry. We need to be releasing them and supporting and encouraging them in that ministry. But we also need ourselves to be praying for and looking for our person of peace. So that we are speaking to those who are open to the gospel. If you and I can be involved in helping just one other person come to faith then the Church of Jesus Christ continues. If we can be involved in helping two people to faith then the church is growing. However of course it is not just about helping people to faith but of helping people to be disciples.

During the week I was re-reading Leroy Eims book, “The lost art of disciple making”. In it he tells of a church minister who had started meeting up to help one man grow in his faith and then later the two of them met up with two others and after a time the four of them began to meet with four others. The result was a group of men spiritually ready for service in the church. “The elderly Pastor told us this was by far the most rewarding, fulfilling and exciting thing that had happened to him in 35 years in the ministry.” We don’t have to be pastors to be involved in that helping of people on in their faith. As we saw in Lifeshapes we are both sheep needing to be taught and fed and shepherds who can help and lead others on in their faith.

So who are we praying for that they will come to faith?

Who are we helping on in their faith?

Are we as a church seeing God’s kingdom grow?

This autumn again hundreds of acorns will descend on my garden and a few will take root. Our desire and prayer should be that out of this church seeds of the gospel should be spread with the awareness that under God some will take root and produce a harvest in due season.