

Acts 14:8-25

Last week I mentioned my garden and the large oak trees there and the fact that each year they shed loads of acorns, good number of which seem to sprout up. It made me think about growing and the garden always makes me ask the question how do things grow? I have been responsible this week for watering a neighbour's garden and making sure his tomatoes etc keep growing. Now I have to say that I am not really the right person to do this because I have no idea what I am doing. How much water do tomatoes need and how often? Anyway they seem not only to have survived but to have flourished.

However what we are thinking about over these weeks is the growth not of tomatoes but of the kingdom of God as we follow the journeys of Paul and his companions round the Mediterranean and see the spread of the Christian church.

As we were reminded last week Jesus had said to his disciples, "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" (Acts 1:8) and this is what we are seeing in these chapters and continue to see in the history of the church, God's kingdom spreading and growing.

Today we look at the second part of the first of Paul's missionary journey's.

Having set out from Antioch and gone across to Cyprus, where last week we saw in Paphos the spiritual battle with Elymas, whom Paul described as "a child of the devil", Paul journeyed on to what we know as Turkey to Perga and from there overland to Antioch, Iconium and to Lystra where we pick up the events of the journey today.

1. The man v8-15a

As I said last week the focus in these chapters is very much on Paul. Yes there were others with him and indeed at the beginning last week it seemed as if Barnabas was key but here 7 times Paul's name is mentioned and in v12 he is described as the "chief speaker".

Paul had had that amazing conversion on the road to Damascus, he had been chosen by God while in the church of Antioch and sent out. Now he is on the road preaching the word of God, battling with the devil and more than that. For here in Lystra we see him heal a man who was lame from birth.

Clearly Paul was not your ordinary Christian! Indeed I think we are meant to see similarities here with Peter who in Acts 3 performed his first miracle by healing man lame from birth. But also we are meant to see that Paul's ministry was taking the same line as that of Jesus. Jesus battled in the desert with the devil, preached in the synagogue and was rejected and healed the paralysed man.

What Luke is doing for us here is in a way showing us the credentials of this man Paul.

However we must be wary not to do a kind of Christian equivalent of what the people of Lystra did and somehow exalt Paul. The point is clear there in the middle of v15, "We too are only men, human

like you.” As look at Paul’s life and ministry we are rightly amazed at what he did and how God used him. Last week I mentioned the death of John Stott who had been rector of All Souls and had had a world wide ministry. This week I see that there are memorial services taking place around the world, Canada, India, USA, Australia, New Zealand and so on as people rightly thank God for John’s life and ministry. However we must always be careful not to elevate people and put them on pedestals. How we love to do that in this country, but usually only so that later we can knock them down. Some may have seen the documentary on Ian Botham a couple of weeks ago and how he went from being a failed England captain to Ashes hero in a short space of time and was lauded in all the press only a few years later to be knocked down to zero again. John Stott was a great man of God but he was only a man. Paul was a great man of God but he was only a man and we must in each case see through the man or woman to the God who is God.

But then also we must see that when Paul says I am human like you the implications of that if we are followers of Jesus. It is so easy to look at Paul and say I couldn’t do that in the way that I say I am not the right person to be looking after someone’s garden. Yes we are not Paul and yes I am not a gardener but we can each be involved in the spread of the gospel just as I can be involved in a small way in helping my neighbour’s tomatoes to grow. I may not be a Paul or a Barnabas but I am a follower of Jesus and I am called to be a witness for him to those around me and that is how the church spreads and grows.

2. The message v15b-18

Now clearly Paul had been preaching the good news in Lystra, we can see that from v7 and the reference to it here in v15. However what Paul went on to say is very interesting because you will note there was no mention of Jesus, no reference to Scripture. Paul here was dealing with pagans which is clear from their reference to these Greek gods. So Paul adjusted what he said to be relevant to them. Instead of pointing them to a Bible they didn’t know he directed them to the natural world which they did. He told them of the creator God who sustains all life and through that shows that he is God and in control of the world. In other words Paul was beginning with where they were, speaking in way that they could relate to and as such that is a lesson to us today. In terms of the starting point and the style of our communication we need to understand where people we are speaking with are at. Can I ask how often do you go on facebook or twitter? No me neither. However for many people that is how they communicate and as such perhaps a modern day starting point for sharing the gospel, a place to begin. However as John Stott reminds us in his commentary on Acts, “Wherever we begin, however, we shall end with Jesus Christ, who is himself the good news and who alone can fulfil all human aspirations”.

3. The means v20-25

Paul's concern under God was to see the gospel spread, to see the kingdom of God grow. What we see in these chapters are the means through which he did that. In v20 we see that, despite all that had happened in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, "he and Barnabas left for Derbe". They were forever on the move, a few days, weeks or months in one place and then onto the next. There, v21 "they preached the good news." They taught people the gospel and through that they "won a large number of disciples". Jesus charge to his followers was to "go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt 28:19-20) That was what Paul was doing and as they preached the word so people came to faith. It was the preaching of the word which was effective and we need to continue as a church and individually to trust in God's word to bring people to faith.

So Paul moved from place to place preaching the word and seeing people come to faith. But then note v21 they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch before Perga then to Attalia and from there took a relaxed cruise round back to Selucia. The purpose or retracing his steps was, v22, "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith." If the church is to grow that is what we need to continue to do to strengthen each other and encourage each other in the faith. That was the purpose of the one to one sessions that we had last year but again it is not just me who can do that as all of us can water tomatoes so all of us can help and encourage each other on in the faith. We do it as we meet together Sunday by Sunday. I often think people fail to see the importance of meeting together. It is vital that we are here regularly not just for what you can get out of being here but because of the encouragement your being here gives to others and especially to me.

Paul's way of spreading the gospel was to go from place to place preaching the word and then to return to strengthen and encourage and also, v23 he appointed elders. Now please do not make doctrine from history and say because Paul established elders every church today should have elders. Paul's concern at this point was to ensure that reliable men were in place to continue to teach the gospel and strengthen the new disciples. It also shows that Paul was about building churches rather than just seeing people come to faith because the church would be the place where the new disciples could continue to grow and also where the spread of the gospel could continue.

4. The manner v19 &22.

In all this we should not miss the cost involved for Paul. At the end of Acts 13 we see how in Antioch some of the Jews opposed Paul who then said he would go with the gospel to the gentiles. That further enraged the Jews and 13:50, "They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region." Similarly in Iconium they found opposition and here in Lystra v19 Jews from Antioch and Iconium came and stirred up the crowd and they took Paul out and stoned

him. In a sense this became the hallmark of Paul's ministry. In 2 Tim 3:10-11 we read, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings— what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured." This was the manner of Paul's ministry – it involved opposition and persecution. But Paul knew that was the way not just for him but for every disciple of Jesus and so we have v22, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" by which he meant that the path of discipleship leading to heaven is not easy. It wasn't for Jesus, it wasn't for Paul and it isn't for us. However, Paul persevered and in that letter to Timothy was encouraging him to persevere and today would encourage us to persevere and in the same way that he said to Timothy in 2 Tim 4:2 he would say to us, "Preach the word". Yes he found opposition and so do we but the church grows as it is watered by the word of God. Someone asked me in the week if it is a coincidence that those of us who are reading the Bible through in a year are at present reading these chapters of Acts. I said in a sense it was because it was no planning of mine but it is clearly is of God. As is I think the fact that this week one of the Psalms I read had this verse in it, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light." (Psalm 36:9) God is the one who waters the seed he has sown through his followers. He does that from the fountain of the word of life and it is the water which continues to keep alive the people of God.

David Jackman in his book 'Understanding the Church' wrote this "I once saw 'Our business is growing' on a delivery van for a market gardener and it seemed to be such an appropriate motto for the church, 'Our business is growing'. It is our business to grow numerically as the number of disciples increases through the church's evangelism. That should be the norm where a congregation is taking the great commission seriously and prayerfully. But it is also our business to grow in quality as disciples as each of us becomes more like the Lord Jesus Christ. Both sorts of growth are vital and Biblical requirements. There must be expansion as disciples are made; there must also be a deepening of spiritual life."

This is our business. Our business is growing. It is not my business it is our business and we each have a part to play in growing the church. What I hope God is saying to each of us today is what part am I playing? Yes I know many of us will say I am not the right person to do this. But God has chosen us to be followers of Jesus and he thinks we can play our part. So "our business is growing" not tomatoes but disciples what part are you playing in that growing? I want to ask you to think and pray about that and see who outside the church God is encouraging you to speak to about your faith and then who inside the church God wants to use you to strengthen and encourage.

Paul was a great man with the gospel whom God used to build and strengthen the church and he was obedient to that call of God even though it was hard. We today are called to the same task. Will we be obedient?