

First Contact

4. Antioch to Antioch (*Acts 13:1-5, 13-16, 42-52, 14:1-7, Rom 1:8-17*)

We saw last week how the way in which the gospel was preached shifted from predominately from Jews to predominately Gentiles. The Gentiles received the message enthusiastically. We saw the rise of Saul of Tarsus - Paul - as the apostle to the Gentiles.

But don't compartmentalise Paul as just a preacher to the Gentiles, because He was a thorough Jew and he said this.

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.

Paul's God - given skill was to be able to speak the timeless truths of God in a way the Gentiles could understand and better still to teach them scripture and make sense of their faith in terms of it. But we see Paul going to the Jews first as he suggests in that reading from Romans.

Why did he share the Good News to the Jew first?

1. ***It was a first point of reference*** As I said last week, Jews started to establish themselves in other cities around the Persian, Greek and then Roman Empires from about 400BC. What transpired by the end of the Exile was that a new institution, the Synagogue was established where the Torah and other scriptures were read. The word comes from the Greek *synagein*, to bring together. Wherever Jews were found, there was found a Synagogue. They really started to develop as Jews spread out during the days of the Greek empire in the first two centuries BC, hence the Greek name. They even produced their own copy of the OT, the Septuagint which is widely accepted as a very good translation of the OT.

The Jews of the Diaspora also did not consider that they needed the Temple to worship in - the reading of the law sufficed. This is quite interesting as it meant they did not have to go to the temple much or even not at all. This spreading or Diaspora led to Jews being found involved in trade throughout the limits of those empires. They did not therefore have to be limited to their accessibility to Jerusalem as the local synagogue sufficed as a "Distant Temple Court". Jews of that time as today varied from the more orthodox Jews who dressed distinctively and kept themselves separate to those who blended.

This was different to the more traditional Judaism of the Old Testament but the Jews of the Diaspora were helped much by certain books in the Septuagint which are now in the Apocrypha which supported their position - which were not altogether accepted by Judean Jews. Better still, because the Jews in these places were not strongly Jerusalem-based but believed that God could be worshipped anywhere meant that they were one step along the road to the Christian faith which took a similar position. The gospel made sense to the Jews of the Diaspora because they had already cut the link with Jerusalem but had made nothing of the idea that God could be worshipped anywhere and logically their sins had to be atoned for another way.

Many Jews of the Diaspora were "universalists" in that they believed scriptures like Isaiah 49 were written to Israel as God's servant and they had a duty to bring

God to the Gentiles and preach Him to them - which they did. There was a movement of Jewish evangelists in this period bringing Judaism to Gentiles to produce proselytes.

The concept of grace was not alien to Jews of the Diaspora - they already knew what it was but had a problem with it in the absence of a sacrifice. Christianity, when they were presented with it, made a lot of sense.

What's this got to do with Paul? Paul existed in two worlds, brought up as a Jew of the Diaspora with an education as a Pharisee in Jerusalem. In fact as Paul embarks on his first Missionary Journey he heads for the synagogue. Why? Because that's the place where the Word of God was going to be read. That's the first point of contact where he could most easily preach the gospel. And where it often found acceptance. There were usually many Gentiles associated with the Synagogue. As we'll find out at a later date, monotheism was popular with Greek philosophers and the relative simplicity of Judaism but better still, to them Paul's preaching made sense as it really did have the answers the Jews were missing.

2. *The Jews had been God's chosen earthly people, so they had "first refusal".*

It was to them that God had chosen to share something of Himself. But now He was spreading His favour to the Gentiles.

Paul was not anti-Jew. He was a Jew. Yet He saw beyond his Judaism to God's prophetic word and that is what we see in Acts 14: *46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."*

Paul directly quotes as his mission from Isaiah 49. It's very revealing.

Is 49:5 And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- 6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

It is part of one of the servant songs in Isaiah, the best known of which is Isaiah 53. The servant is Christ. Therefore the mission is Christ's in Isaiah 49. *And it is - too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*

Christ is the light for the Gentiles and therefore Paul was identifying with that. It was the command to Christ so it was the command to the followers. Not only the Jews, but the Gentiles - to the ends of the earth. This also reflects the Lord's command in Acts 1:8 where the disciples were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

That's why in all the cities Paul is recording as travelling to in the First Missionary Journey (or anywhere else) he visits the Jews first. And when inevitably he was kicked out, he went to the Gentiles in obedience to the Word of God.

Many Jews accepted Christ, but many found that his not requiring them to become proselytes as unacceptable. On the other hand we see the Gentiles embracing the message with enthusiasm.

But who were their persecutors? Why tried to run them out of town - it was the Jews, conspiring and inciting the Gentiles against them. The people who should have most easily have identified with the message of the gospel were the chief protagonists. They tried to run them out of town and get them stoned. The Gentiles, who should not have known anything about anything embraced the gospel readily.

This is a challenge to us I believe. Let me make a few points.

● ***The most significant obstacle to the spread of the gospel in this land is the church, or to be more precise, churches.*** What a remarkable thing to say. Because it is Christians who most oppose the gospel moving forward. Like the Jews they are threatened by it. Or worse it threatens their brand of Christianity. I have a friend in Southend who leads a church plant - a church for the new generation. It's a Baptist church plant. It's aimed at people who are un-churched and even disaffected by church. It doesn't have a building as it's a cell church. They have their larger celebrations on a Saturday. Church, but not as we know it. It's growing quickly though. Whereas they preach the gospel and have Bible teaching, they don't do church like other Baptists. In fact some Churches in Southend refused to support the plant, because they were not planting a "Baptist Church".

If we want to share the gospel in Swaffham, we may well not make friends and influence people - particularly those in other churches. We've got to accept that.

● ***Always start with what is there.*** We already have a building and resources and people we have contact with. Paul could reach the Jews because he could speak their language and understood their situation. We have got contact with people now - let's go before God and see how we can bring the gospel to them more effectively. But that said...

● ***Let's not limit the Gospel to those like us.*** In my last church we had an enormous number of "fringe" people in the church who were of questionable commitment. We could have spent a long time on them because they understood what we were about. They spoke our language, they came to church regularly - yet the barrier was highest with the. Yet as we engaged people in the community we found that people were ready to embrace the gospel readily. I believe that in Swaffham there is an enormous harvest of people with hopeless messy lives. But let's also think that people are too hard to be saved. There has been a whole generation of this in the UK. Hard people - there's nothing too hard for God. Paul happily moved from the Jews to the Gentiles. But in doing so he stirred up a hornet's nest. The Jews couldn't accept what was going on. They opposed them with serious consequences.

We are trying to reach a whole new generation of people who are unchurched. They think that we are a strange cult - a secret society. We need to reach them using methods quite alien to us. Their language is different, their music is different, their lifestyle is different. The greatest opposition I have ever found to spreading the gospel has been other Christians. How awful - you can't write and sing hymns with music like that! You can't use that version of the Bible! You can't use that method of evangelism. You can't go to that event to share the gospel because it's on a Sunday. You can't have that kind of service in a church for these people. You can't go there and share the gospel.

In Antioch Paul gave a convincing sermon on what the Christian faith was about. But the Jews could not separate the Word of God, the scriptures, from their way of life and from practices and attitudes associated with their culture. This is important for us to realise. We must be able to separate the timeless truths of God from our own preferences and culture. It's immensely difficult to unravel them as people will often maintain practices religiously even though they aren't worth dying for.

Part of Bible College training is to learn Church History. Why history? Surely it should suffice to just learn the Word of God. History tells us how we have used or misused the grace that God has given to us.

Where is this taking us. Paul and Barnabas were called and led to reach the people of their generation. That is our call in Swaffham in the 21st Century. Let's listen the voice of God and not to our backgrounds and reach the lost.

● ***The final challenge is how much are we prepared to take risks for the sake of the gospel.*** Paul and Baranbas took risks to preach at the people in Cyprus, and Antioch and Iconium and then in the end got stoned in Lystra. At the moment we are still in Antioch in Syria but as we set sail into our community, we have to accept that even though nothing is too hard for God, there are those that will oppose us. The gospel is not popular today. We are a small minority. We will be unpopular. But I'll tell you what, we will be most unpopular amongst other Christians - I use the word guardedly - in town or maybe even this church. In both Antioch and Iconium the preaching of the gospel caused a stir. People coming to Christ causes a stir. As Paul and Barnabas did miraculous signs, people believed and Iconium was divided as those against them stirred things.

If you want a quiet life, don't preach the gospel. But as they say in the SAS - who dares wins.

The challenge I leave you with is this. As with Paul and Barnabas, God is taking us into uncharted territory. But what was the result of going into that territory:

13:44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

What about our territory?



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