

Antioch : 'In' , Sunday 25th October 2020.

Acts 11:19-30

John 13:31-35

May the words of my mouth, the mediations of all our heart be acceptable in your sight, o lord our rock and redeemer. Amen.

We are watching our favourite television programs, and then the tv adverts come on – what do you do, maybe you go get a beer, go to the toilet, you flick channels, you are waiting until the next important part begins.

We can maybe have that attitude towards this passage from Acts. We come across it in an action packed middle section of the book. In Acts 9, we have Saul's conversion to Christianity – Saul we know as Paul. In Acts 10, we have had the highly important event of Cornelius' conversion and that the message of the Lord Jesus is for all people and not just for the Jews. Then, in Acts 12, we have Peter's dramatic escape from prison, and after that come Paul's missionary journeys. In among these vivid events comes our passage. It can feel like an intermission – there isn't much there, and let's get to the next big thing Luke wants to tell us. But this is a rich passage...

It helps us think again what does a Church of IN – of deep community and lifelong discipleship look like...

“Apart from Jerusalem, no city of the Roman Empire played as large a part in the early life and fortunes of the Christian church as Antioch of Syria (R. Longnecker).

Beginnings

Stephen was the first Christian martyr in Acts 7 and then Saul leads a persecution which scatters the church. “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch...”¹ Then the key event...

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. (Acts 11:20-21).

Antioch was the “first great city”² where Christianity gained its footing.³

Antioch?

Antioch was about 640 km north of Jerusalem. Which is slightly more than the distance from Amersfoort to Berlin. Today it lies in southern Turkey, 2 hours west by car from the city of Aleppo. At the time of Acts, it was the capital of the Roman Province of Syria. It was ten times bigger than Jerusalem.

¹ Why Antioch? Some of the Christians may have known the city, having lived nearby in Cyprus, or known of its strong Jewish population. It was a city estimated to have a population of 300,000, with a Jewish population of 22000-65000, (McRay, John R., ‘Antioch on the Orontes’, in Hawthorne, Gerald F., Martin, Ralph P. (eds.), Reid, Daniel G. (assoc. ed.), *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p.23). Antioch was considered to be “the third largest city” within the Roman Empire, located on the Orontes River, and a junction for trades routes in that part of the Middle East, (Johnson, Sherman Elbridge, ‘Antioch of Syria’, in Metzger, Bruce M. & Coogan, Michael D. (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.32

² Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p.43

³ Bosch, p.43.

Its population was around 300000 with a Jewish population of between 22- 65000. It was the third greatest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandra.

Formed through persecution

It is here a new church community begins. This was a church founded not by missionary strategy, but by *enforced migration* – namely persecution.⁴

The core of this first Christian community in Antioch are Christian refugees – those fleeing from persecution. That has a familiar modern ring – of Christians fleeing hundreds of miles from danger.

As a church, it is my heart that we will be a church always with a heart and willing to pray for the persecuted members of our Christian family – as part of our UP – within our worship and prayer – but also as part of OUT – of how we can play our part as part of one global body of Christ – but this flows I believe from our IN – these are our brothers and sisters. Our support for one another – our love for one another as Jesus commands in John – I believe is not restricted to our congregation, but extends to globally. Remembering that if one suffers, all suffer, as Paul puts it. To ask ourselves, how we can serve and love believers today experiencing what the believers described in v19 had.

So Antioch is formed out of a time and experience of persecution.

Persecuted flee but evangelise as they go

⁴ It is noteworthy that the movement commanded by Jesus to disciple the nations only commenced with persecution.” Stamoolis, James J., ‘History of Missions’, in Moreau, A. Scott (gen. ed.), Netland, Harold & van Engen, Charles (assoc. eds.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p.439

This was enforced migration but these persecuted believers, wherever they go – to Phoenicia - located in modern day Lebanon, to Cyprus – and to Antioch. Where they go they “tell the message” the message, the good news about Jesus. That is inspiring and a bit crazy? I mean if you have been persecuted for sharing the message about Jesus then surely this is the last thing you would want to do. Wouldn't you want to just get somewhere safe, not evangelise as you go? And when you arrive in city – like Antioch – where you have been travelling – a place with a significant Jewish population some of whom could send word to Saul – you'd want to lie low, become a hidden church, an underground church, only for the members.

But they do proclaim the faith, do preach the gospel, do evangelise. Why would they want to share their faith and live out their faith, when that mere act has led them to be forced to leave their homes, their families, to move from their homeland? It challenges and inspires us...

Speak to Greeks too...

Looking again at v19. 'telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the news about the Lord Jesus.' These mostly anonymous believers evangelise - through personal evangelism is suggested – 'telling the message' - perhaps in the squares or in the religious places. It is suggested perhaps it is more in smaller numbers people are converted than in one dramatic moment.

Missiologist Andrew Walls, says what occurs at Antioch is ““first real encounter of the Christian faith with the pagan world””⁵.

⁵ Andrew Walls quoted in Bevans & Schroeder, p.25

We seek to be a church of OUT – of service and evangelism. It is easy and perhaps more popular to focus only on service and doing good things. These are important. But we do not do them to replace evangelism. We remain willing to share the reason for the hope that we have. As we think of those we work with or live nearby, what ways would we share the gospel with them – what ways would they understand, how can we help them make the next step? We began to think about these ideas last month in our sermons, and our Life Groups will explore this, through the Talking Jesus series.

God's hand

And the activities are blessed – God's hand is at work. Luke describes the growth of Antioch in ways similar to how the church in Jerusalem had grown. The Antioch Church experiences fast growth, both before (v21) and after Barnabas' arrival (v24) from Jerusalem.

And it recalls two things. One, as we look back on the year that has been, do we see the hand of the Lord? In the life of this church? Even during these months of Coronavirus?

It would be easy to concentrate just on what has happened and miss whose hand has been at work.

Secondly for our future, in seeking to grow our church – and at this point thinking – numerically – we continue to seek the Lord's hand to be at work . We have seen the Lord's hand at work, we ask and long for him to continue to be at work.

'News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.'

I don't know what image you have of Barnabas. He is described as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" I always image a slightly big man, tall, beard, big laugh... I think I've said before – a Big version of Gimil out of Lord of the Rings. Maybe that says more about men and the films I've watched! His description and actions, gives an example of what deep community can look like...

We already know things about him. He is from Cyprus –from the tribe of Levi – he had sold a field he owned – and remember, traditionally Levities did not own land, so however he owned it, it was quite a rare possession. And gave it to the apostles in Jerusalem to help people in need (Acts 4). And then when Saul becomes a believer – and he goes to Jerusalem and seeks to meet the believers, no one trusts him, thinking he is trying to trick them (Acts 9), but, 9:27 – "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus."

He is a *man of discernment*. He has already shown that in the way he has treated Paul. And here he discerns "evidence of the grace of God' – he sees when God is at work.

He is a man of generosity. We have seen that in his selling of a field. But also I'd suggest, he may well have been generous here – he may or may not have enjoyed all that was happening in the worship, in the prayer, in the community, in the discipling, in the service or the evangelism, 'but he is glad and encourages them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts' – generous to say, it is not exactly my thing but the Lord is here, he is blessing and the main thing, keep with the Lord.

He is a *son of encouragement* – he encouraged the church, encouraged among the church. The best man to come I'd say...

A church needs the gift of encouragement. That people have permission to fail. When they do fail. They are encouraged as they seek to learn from their mistakes, than fear trying again. That is how people grow into roles in the church, how they step out to do that first reading, first intercession. I go back to the first time I preached, it was my vicar, who in a student service was happy for me to give it a go. That was where it began. And many people along the way who have, despite my many mistakes, encouraged. A church can be – we can be known – as a church of encouragement, a church full of Barnabas', a church with a gift of encouragement...

We see two more elements to him: *a man who admits he needs help and a risk taker*. 'A great number have been brought to the Lord' – but he goes to Tarsus – 169km away – to find Saul Paul who is preaching in the area of his home city (Galatians 1:21-24). He admits he cannot do it all. Or he admits that God's vision for this church is much greater than he can fulfil.

You know, we need you, I need you. Not to do what I want or to ease the burden. No, there is only so much that a Council can do. I believe the Lord has a much greater vision for our church than we have began yet to see. When I came, one of my heart's desires, and continues to be, is that All Saints would be involved in helping transform our city – being involved in God's kingdom purposes – and seeing not only lives transformed but communities and our city. And for us a church to be a church of blessing to many other churches here in the Netherlands. I believe God's plans for All Saints was not merely to have us become established and independent, last June and to have Up, In, Out as our DNA - that is

like Acts 11 Antioch. I feel that is chapter 1 of the book, his plans are so much greater. And for us to do all the Lord would ask of us, I feel he is going to ask all of us to be involved, and all of us have a part to play – young, old, inbetween. Part of my role is to help encourage people so all are involved, playing the part the Lord asks of us.

As a Council and a chaplain we can not do all the Lord would ask. But, all of us, as a body, with the Lord's resources, doing his work in his way, we will achieve what he would ask of us for kingdom's work.

Barnabas – realised he needs help.

He is a *risk taker*. The risk is Saul. For along time I thought – great choice!

But who is Saul? Well, Saul is the reason, indirectly this church exists, isn't he? The church was formed by persecution, brutal persecution that Saul led or initiated – Acts 8 says 'Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.' Imagine the street where you live – there a few roads where you know there are quite a few fellow believers. Imagine you are looking out the window and you see the police, and believers being dragged out, you keep watching, you see the next house three doors down, you've been to their church, you run to get a suitcase, get some clothes, there is banging at your door, you run out the back door just in time to see police coming in your yard... The first Christians in Antioch fled that. They fled 600 km to get away from that man. And Barnabas goes and gets him.

Did they know Barnabas' plan or did it just happen – Big Barnabas – big booming voice, comes into the gathering and says 'I'm here' and I'm brought a friend – do you know him?! Maybe people say – yes we do know him, he is the reason we are here and not in Jerusalem. That is why I had to take my kids and wife with me 600 km to this city. That is risk.

Of course, it works out fine – we know that. But it was a risk. It could have been divisive. He had to trust that these men and women had forgiven him or would forgive him and welcome him as a true brother in Christ.

Saul is accepted. It is beautiful. We see a church of acceptance and love and generosity who knew the acceptance, generosity and love of God shown to them in Christ. Christ prayed – father forgive them for they know not what they are doing, as Stephen imitated Christ when he was stoned to death. Christ is said – love one another as I have loved you. I think we see deep community in action here.

Barnabas also fully welcomes Saul. There is a concept that welcome is only about what happens at the door or after a service. But welcome is much deeper and broader. Welcome – for a community to be deep – is about a person not only being welcomed into the service but into the life and community of the church, and being allowed to use their spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, express their personality and share or use their life experience. Saul could have been kept at the margins but he is fully welcomed into that church.

The disciples were called Christians

Antioch is the first church of its kind in the New Testament – “now in Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, a multiethnic church is described.”⁶ It is not only Jewish and Gentile, but the later leadership of the church - in Acts 13 - reflects “an international church”⁷ again the first in Christianity.⁸

The uniqueness of Antioch is affirmed by it being *the first place* where believers of ‘the Way’ are called *Christians*.⁹ Certainly Christ was central to their beliefs and lifestyle as can be gathered from this naming. The title suggested they “went beyond the bounds of what was usually permitted within Judaism.”¹⁰ This was the first place where *Jews and Gentiles enjoyed table fellowship together* – as South African missiologist David Bosch says “there was to begin with, no church apartheid in Antioch.”¹¹ This is shown in Galatians 2. Those outside the Christian community could see that there was something distinctive about this group.

So here for the first time, followers of Jesus were called ‘Christian’.

⁶ Moreau, A. Scott, Corwin, Gary R. & McGee, Gary B. (eds.), *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p.53

⁷ Kisau, Paul Mumo, ‘Acts of the Apostles’, in Adeyemo, Tokunboh (gen. ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*, (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), p.1323

⁸ C.f. Acts 13:1. Barnabas and Saul were Hellenistic Jews, one from Cyprus, the other from Tarsus. “Simeon who was called Niger” (13:1), Niger meaning ‘dark-complexioned.’ (Marshall, I. Howard, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p.214). Lucius was from Cyrene, which lay in Roman North Africa. Manean was most likely from Judea – a member of Herod’s court.

⁹ 11:26

¹⁰ Longenecker, ‘Acts’, p.446

¹¹ Bosch, p.43

Conclusion.

The Antioch church have encountered the generous gospel – all are invited to believe and all are brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. They have seen the generous nature of Barnabas both in the affirming of their ministries and mission and their church community.

Modelling to them what community looks like, through his actions. They have been generous in their acceptance and welcome of Saul. As we journey forwards as All Saints, we would do no worse than seek to shape our IN, to shape ourselves – in our deep community – in our discipleship – following the example of Antioch, a church of all ages, all sorts, all backgrounds, all nationalities. Amen.

Prayer.