

## **“A POSTCARD FROM ANTIOCH”**

*Acts 13:13-52*

Well, as we heard last week, Paul and Barnabas have been listening to God and, having heard the call to go and preach the message of Jesus Christ in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), they have set off with little further ado to get on with the task. They've taken a boat and made their way to Cyprus and from there to the mainland, arriving in Perga and then travelling inland to the region of Galatia, ending up in the city of Antioch. Confusingly, there were several cities around the Mediterranean region at this time, all named after the Emperor Antiochus who was King of Syria after the death of Alexander the Great. To distinguish this one from the others, it was known as *Pisidian* Antioch, as it was in Pisidia, a region at the southern edge of the province of Galatia, north of Pamphylia and renowned as bandit country.

It's from there that Paul sends this week's postcard. A fairly hot and arid place, Antioch was on a high plateau. It was a Roman colony and had a large Jewish population. Paul sent off his postcard, with a Turkish stamp, back to the church in Jerusalem, who met at the house of James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in that city. Paul greets the Christians, then lets them know that John Mark has left them. John was Barnabas's cousin and gave up at Perga (*v13*), for reasons which no-one has ever successfully explained. What we do know is that Paul and Barnabas had a real argument about it in the other Antioch that they ended up going their separate ways (*Acts 15:37-39*).

As they went up through Pamphylia, Paul had been taken ill. Again, we don't know exactly what the problem was – many scholars think it may have been something to do with his eyes – but Paul was forced to stay over in Antioch, where the altitude meant that the air was very good for convalescence. Paul mentions this in *Galatians 4:13*, in case you're wondering where this comes from.

As we know, Paul is never one to give up an opportunity to preach about Jesus, so, while he is recovering from this illness, he decides to use the time he has at his disposal to share this amazing message. As we heard last week, the custom of the first evangelists was to go first to the synagogue and tell the Jewish people all about the gospel. That's the point at which Paul wrote this postcard: looking forward to being with his fellow Jews and having the joy of telling them about Jesus and about his own wonderful experience of conversion. So let's see what happens next and consider whether there is anything we can learn from his experience and example in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Paul and Barnabas, and the others who were travelling with them, go along to the synagogue on Saturday morning with all the other Jewish men. As we've said, there was a sizeable Jewish population in Antioch and one of the ways in which they preserved their ethnic and religious identity in a foreign place was to meet together for worship and teaching. The men who gathered there were a ready made audience for Paul. And they would have been pretty familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, so Paul would be able to start off without too long an introduction. The usual passages were read from the scrolls – a bit like following a lectionary, with set readings for each week of the year – and then someone would be invited to speak about them. If there was a visitor, especially a visiting rabbi, present, then he would be asked to say a few words.

Well, Paul was a visiting rabbi and we know that Paul needed no second invitation to say a few words! He was quickly on his feet and launching into his exposition of the word of God. He starts off pretty straightforwardly with a bit of Old Testament history and then branches off to show how the Old Testament was really a preparation and the foundation for the ministry and mission of Jesus. He reminds them of their history and quotes from the Psalms and the Prophets. It's a sermon which starts where they're at and then moves them on to the truths of the Gospel. There aren't that many sermons recorded in *Acts*, but the few that there are are all very similar. (Perhaps that's why Luke doesn't record too many of them – there's not enough variety!) But this is remarkably similar to the sermon that Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, the sermon that Stephen gave before he was stoned to death, and the sermons that Paul preached in Lystra and (although the illustrations were changed) in Athens.

One thing that can be said for Paul and the first evangelists is that there was a real consistency in the message that they proclaimed. They usually talk about the ways in which God prepared for the coming of Jesus through the time of the Old Testament. They often mention John the Baptist, the kind of link between that and Jesus, then they go on to talk about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – which they had all witnessed and which (as Paul tells Festus in *Acts 27:26*) was not “*done in a corner*”. Finally, they tell their listeners that this means forgiveness of sins and liberty from what they see as bondage to the Law of Moses. But it requires a step of faith, a conscious decision to believe. A response is invited. If you look at the other sermons that are recorded in *Acts*, you’ll see that that’s the normal pattern. Their message was always the same. As we’ll see when Paul gets to Athens, the illustrations and the starting point sometimes differ, but there is no tinkering with the basic message.

And the reception is usually the same, as well. Some people respond with immediate belief. Some people are immediately opposed. And some people ask to hear more – which is what happens here. Luke tells us that, the next week, “*almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord*”. (There has always been an element of exaggeration in the reporting of crowds at mission events!) But that leads to problems. Some of the Jews were put off by the crowds. Something new was happening. This seemed to be too successful.

They were, as Luke puts it, “*filled with jealousy*”. Suddenly they weren’t at the centre of attention. Suddenly things were happening which they couldn’t control. Suddenly, they weren’t able to know everything that was going on. And hasn’t that always been the way in the Church? Whenever things start to happen, people get upset, “*jealous*”. You see it whenever there is talk of revival. It’s happening at the moment with the reports of the Todd Bentley revival in Florida. You see it when another church starts to get a bit of a growth spurt – they must be doing something wrong, or people wouldn’t be flocking to them. (No-one ever suggests they might be doing something *right*!) Sadly, it’s a concern that has been raised here as the church has started to grow – people have actually become jealous that they are no longer right at the centre of things, or that things are being done differently. I don’t mind admitting that I’ve had to grapple with a bit of that myself as things have changed round me. I have heard more than one comment about the church being too big now. Well, if ever you get here on a Sunday morning and find “*almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord*” we’ll have a chat about whether we’re too big: until then we’ll go on trying to enable more and more people to hear the gospel message and experience the love of Jesus Christ in action. Is that OK?

Paul and Barnabas were pretty direct in their response to the criticism and abuse they received. “Fair enough,” they say. “If you’re not happy with what we have to say and with what we’re doing, we’ll go and do it somewhere else. We gave you the opportunity to hear and respond first of all, but if that’s your attitude, we’ll go elsewhere” and they back it up with scripture (*vv46,47*). It gives the missionaries the opportunity for a new start and they go off preaching to the Gentiles, with powerful effect. Luke says that “*the word of the Lord spread through the whole region*”.

But, as is so often the case, doing new things attracts opposition. The opponents in the Jewish community start a whispering campaign, using some of the most influential figures in the establishment who are Jewish sympathisers, both men and women – making the most of all the networks. They make life tough for Paul and his little group, eventually telling them that they are no longer welcome. So Paul and Barnabas do exactly what Jesus told them to do in such circumstances (*Luke 9:5*): they symbolically shake the dust off their feet and thus make clear that they will no longer have anything to do with them in that place, setting off for Iconium over to the east. And we will pick up the travels of Paul and his band as they continue their mission in a couple of weeks’ time.

But what do we see here that might encourage us? Well, this is the story of a new start, a new direction in the mission of the gospel. Paul and his companions make a conscious decision that they will take the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. And so often when we decide to strike out in new directions it means there is opposition and difficulty. In this part of the story, Paul has to deal with defection from his own

group, with illness and with powerful opposition from vested interests and those jealous of their own position. Last week we heard that following God's calling isn't always difficult – and it isn't. But sometimes the consequences of it cause us real difficulties. You may not think that is terribly encouraging. I agree: it's not. But it does help to be prepared for things to get difficult. We need to ensure that we are close to God and sticking to what he wants us to do, even if there are obstacles to be overcome.

And we need to ensure that we stick to the core message of the gospel. As we've said, there was a remarkable consistency in the proclamation of the first evangelist. They changed the way in which they communicated the message depending on their audience, but the message stayed the same – God planned to send Jesus into this world, and his life, death and resurrection opened the way to forgiveness for all those who take the step of believing in him. We must never compromise on that, never change the fundamentals of our gospel. There must always be that invitation to respond to the life-giving grace of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

And then the encouragements really start. Look what else happened here, apart from defection, illness and persecution. Lives were changed. God's word spread. Those who believed were "*filled with joy and the Holy Spirit*". Now, persecution doesn't *always* happen. We don't *always* have to cope with obstacles: often, maybe, but not always. But there is *always* joy and Holy Spirit anointing when we are faithful to God's word. Do you want that? Do you want to share in the joy of God's people? Do you want to know the anointing of the Holy Spirit? Do you want to see the word of God spread through this city? New starts are important and a real part of the progress of the Gospel. But the consistency of the message is paramount. We need to stick to the core truths of the Gospel, to keep on believing in the forgiveness of God, to stake our all on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. My prayer is that we will keep focussed on Jesus, keep Jesus "*at the heart of this church*" as we seek to fulfil our call to be a "*church at the heart of this city*". May God grant us his joy and the anointing of his Holy Spirit.

*Discussion notes on next page*

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This is the story of a new start, a new direction in the mission of the gospel. Often when we decide to strike out in new directions it means there is opposition and difficulty. We need to ensure that we are close to God and sticking to what he wants us to do and we need to ensure that we stick to the core message of the gospel. But, apart from defection, illness and persecution, lives were changed. God's word spread. Those who believed were "*filled with joy and the Holy Spirit*". We need to stick to the core truths of the Gospel, to keep on believing in the forgiveness of God, to stake our all on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. What would you want to include in any presentation of the Gospel that you were asked to give? Why?
2. Why does "success" so often provoke jealousy in Christian contexts? What can we do about it?
3. How long should we try to keep going against opposition? How do we know when it is right to give up?
4. In what new directions might God be calling us to go?