

Reading: Acts of the Apostles 11:19-26

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

New King James Version (NKJV)

Preaching notes:

Our theme for today's reading is The Growing Church. We may not see it at first sight, blink and you have missed it, but the event recalled in this reading is truly one of the greatest moments in the formation of the Christian Church. Those believers dispersed from Jerusalem into the surrounding areas have "been spreading the word (of the gospel) only among Jews". Separately, Philip had been preaching in Samaria (Acts 8), evangelising the Ethiopian. Saul of Tarsus – once the worst persecutor of the church) has been converted (Acts 9) and Peter has preached and led Cornelius, his household and others to faith in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10). But this is the first-time believers (men from Cyprus and Cyrene) have brought the good news of Jesus to non-Jews in such a deliberate, widespread and fruitful way.

Notice that this is not the result of "a well-researched and cleverly communicated growth plan", there is no "mission statement" or "strategy document", instead we learn that "the Lord's hand was with them". These men (because we do not know their names) have not been on a course to learn special techniques, they are people like you and me. What does set them apart and makes them effective disciple-makers is that they are living the genuine and true, Christian life as followers of Christ and are full of God's Holy Spirit.

We learn that when news of what has occurred in Antioch reaches Jerusalem, Barnabas is despatched. We gain no sense that he was there to organise or to investigate or even to report back, but instead to encourage and join with the work. Barnabas is described as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith", just one sentence but a description I would gladly receive if it were proffered, what about you?

When Barnabas first arrives at Antioch he encourages them all **"to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts"**. I wonder when was the last time you as a believer heard such encouragement? Have we forsaken our love of God, our passion to be witnesses to Jesus,

our clear instruction to make disciples of all in all nations, baptising and to be great encouragers, for something that is far less even than a shadow of what it should be.

Considering this question on what some call Aldersgate Sunday is wholly appropriate, John Wesley believed completely in the transforming power of the gospel. Aldersgate is the place where Wesley had gone to attend a Bible study and that very evening received the Holy Spirit into his life, he described the event as: “my heart was strangely warmed”. He believed passionately in new birth (John 3:7) and the regeneration of a sinful life by and through the Holy Spirit and for the church to return to its true intention to make disciples and spread the gospel. Wesley spoke of the need to make disciples rather than buildings and his words about the Methodist movement apply to us just as much today if not more than they did in the 18th Century: *“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out”*.

Having titled our theme: “The Growing Church” we could also sub-title it: “Faithful Partners”. Barnabas recognises that this work at Antioch requires additional labourers, perhaps requires some gifts that he feels he does not possess so he goes in search of Saul (Paul) and together, for a whole year, they minister and teach this growing church. This time together forges them into a partnership that takes them to Seleucia, Cyprus, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts chapter 13 and 14).

In the concluding verse of our passage we learn that it was in this Greek city of Antioch that the believers were first called Christians – remember that up to this point the believers have been predominantly Jews, closely linked to Jews (Samaritans) or proselytes (converts). Read Acts 15: 5 and you will see that this was still very much a Jewish movement, Pharisees were still debating with the believers (the Jerusalem church) about the requirement of circumcision. The name “Christian” comes from the Greek *christianos* and means “little Christ”, so to be a Christian means to be someone who demonstrates and exemplifies the life of Christ.

In closing, I believe that a fresh filling of God’s Holy Spirit over all that we do is available for us. Holding fast to the teaching and example of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit is more important than our own plans, schemes or programmes. Everything that was achieved at Antioch was by the grace of God, the Lord’s hand and the power of His Holy Spirit, ordinary men and women (just like us) serving obediently and reverently a truly extraordinary God. Amen.