

Acts 13:23

God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised

On 13 March, 1813, a son was born into a devout Christian family in Blantyre, Scotland

- In a part of Scotland known as Lanarkshire about 10 miles south of Glasgow
- Leaving school at 10, he soon worked long hours in the local mill (84/week)
- At the age of 17, he became a Christian and saved for his education as a doctor
- Sent to the coast of South Africa as a medical missionary
- he wanted to reach more Africans
- And so requested permission to move 700 miles inland
- The beginning of what would be 30,000 miles of travel in Africa
- He later married and became father to four children
- But although his family often travelled with him there were times of separation
- Including one period of two and a half years, when he crossed the continent
- Mainly following the River Zambezi, he discovered and named the Victoria Falls
- After the death of his wife, he ventured into North Africa, reaching Lake Tanganyika
- Often weakened by bouts of African fever
- Months passed without the outside world knowing where he was
- Accepting the challenge to find him, a New York reporter, Henry Morgan Stanley
- Travelled with supplies to Lake Tanganyika, in modern Tanzania
- Finding the frail old missionary in November 1871
- Stanley greeted him with the famous words, 'Dr Livingstone, I presume'
- David Livingstone died on 30 April, 1873, and is buried in Westminster Abbey
- Florence Nightingale called him, 'the greatest man of his generation'
- Of himself, David Livingstone said

'I am a missionary, heart and soul. God had an only Son, and he was a missionary and a physician. A poor, poor imitation of him I am, or wish to be. In this service I hope to live, in it I wish to die.'

It is that great vision, a vision that realises that we worship a 'God of mission'

- That energises and shapes the Christian mission to this day
- In reaching out for the salvation of the world
- God did not send a letter, God did not send a representative or a messenger
- God came - in the person of his only Son, Jesus

The New Testament book of Acts, charts the progress of the Christian message

- As, through the apostles, it makes its way across the known world
- Beginning at Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth
- It was a mission that proceeded by faithfulness
- To the divinely appointed method they used
- To the divinely appointed message they preached
- To the divinely offered mercy
- Luke, the writer of the book we call 'Acts'
- Has given a summary of the ministry of Jesus and all he began to do and teach
- In the book that we call 'Luke's Gospel'
- Now in his second book, he gives an account of the spread of the message of Jesus

I THE METHOD THEY USED

In Acts 12, Luke had broken off his narrative to tell of Peter's miraculous escape from prison

- But he now returns to his account of the church at Syrian Antioch
- Where the believers had first been called 'Christians'
- Antioch of Syria was one of 16 cities of that name dotted around the Mediterranean
- Antiochus being a family name of the Seleucid dynasty
- Luke makes passing mention of the diversity of the leadership of the church there
- Perhaps a wake-up call to those of us in churches with a more monochrome leadership

It is important to notice where their ideas came from: while worshipping the Lord and fasting

- Now I attend enough committee meetings a year not to want to devalue their work
- But it is an important lesson – they did not have a think tank, an ideas day
- A consultation, a general church meeting or any other kind of committee
- They were spending time worshipping the Lord and fasting
- And it was during this time that the Holy Spirit spoke to them
- Directing that Barnabas and Saul be set apart
- For a new work to which they were being called

Even here there is a balance between the leading of the church

- And the calling of the individual
- In the Methodist Church, and similarly in other churches
- Every year, men and women offer themselves for some form of Christian service
- I'll speak about the service of a Methodist minister as that is the one I know the best
- We call a person who offers to be a Methodist minister 'a candidate for the ministry'
- The candidate has many hurdles to jump, many times giving an account of two things
- 'How did you become a Christian?' and
- 'Why do you believe that God is calling you to be a Methodist minister?'
- Candidates whose offer is supported are trained and become probationer ministers
- Every step along the way prospective ministers are asked to affirm their calling
- And various committees in the church are asked to support that calling
- But after several years this all culminates at the annual Methodist Conference
- First with the standing vote of the representative session
- As candidates are received into full connexion – a historic term difficult to explain
- And then as the great ordination service takes place
- And before the prayers and laying on of hands of ordination takes place
- The congregation is invited to affirm 'they are worthy'

We follow this pattern believing it to be a New Testament pattern

- The call to Christian service is supported by the wider community of the church
- In our tradition, the wider the calling the wider the support required
- Throughout my ministry, I have tried to apply this pattern in the local church
- When an individual says they feel they are called to do something
- We seek to go through a process of testing, training, and appointment
- And each step along the way, we want that to be supported by the church
- In Acts, personal call and church affirmation go together
- And though the church 'sent them off' (v. 3) this is the work of the Holy Spirit (v. 4)

Barnabas and Saul (as he is still called) are sent out

- After a period of prayer, fasting, guidance, release and commissioning
- People pray and fast in order to receive the power of God – vital in evangelism
- Fasting adds uninterrupted concentration to ascertain God's will
- But this is complemented by the power of being equipped with God's Word
- This requires study and preparation time
- Immature Christians often want power without prayer and preparation

It reminds me of words of Mark Twain who said:

When I was ten, I thought my parents knew everything. When I became twenty, I was convinced they knew nothing. Then, at thirty, I realised I was right when I was ten.

Prayer here is viewed a service we do for God

- The great Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) said:

“Prayer does not enable us to do a greater work for God. Prayer is a greater work for God.”

We must not forget that the church at Antioch in Syria were losing two of their best men

- For seven years I was minister of a church in North-east Surrey
- Despite the address it was really part of Greater London
- During my seven years there, many of our people moved on in Christian service
- Many felt called to move and continued Christian service in secular employment
- But others left us to follow a Christian vocation or go to Bible college
- We always felt sad when people we considered ‘our best members’ left us
- But we were grateful to have had fellowship with them, even for a short time
- Being in a missionary church is like that – you need to have a vision for mission
- When God calls, we must release even those we think the most important and valued
- Every minister that you have ever had was a loss to his or her home church
- Our aim is not survival or maintenance – if that is our aim we shall surely die
- Our aim is to share in God's mission and by the power of the Spirit tell others of Jesus

Luke recounts the apostles' journey to Cyprus and their journey through the island to Paphos

- The first major outreach from Jerusalem had encountered Simon the sorcerer (8:9-24)
- Now the apostles to the Gentiles encounter the false prophet Bar-Jesus (Elymas)
- As well as the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence (discernment)
- Saul has the opportunity to present the Christian message to a leading Roman
- As a Jew, Saul bore the name of Israel's first king (also of the tribe of Benjamin)
- But he was also a Roman citizen with the name Paulos (meaning ‘little’)
- At this point Luke speaks of ‘Saul, who was also called Paul’ and uses Paul thereafter

Paul's witness to Sergius Paulus and to Bar-Jesus (Elymas) had very different results

- The sorcerer not only opposed the apostles but also tried to influence his master
- Luke is careful to say that Paul was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’
- When he uttered severe words against Elymas

It is a reminder that there are times when it is necessary to speak and act strongly

- Especially when it comes to opposing those who try to keep others from the truth
- Though clearly this must be with God's authority and not simply off our own bat
- The proconsul believed when he 'saw what happened' (Acts 13:12)
- Though the foundation of his belief was his amazement at the teaching about the Lord
- This reminds us that the real foundation of any response of faith is believing in Jesus
- Unbelievers do not become believers because of miracles or worship
- But because they come to see the truth of the message of Jesus
- The conversion of Sergius Paulus was a turning point in Paul's whole ministry
- For now he will continue to make a direct approach to the Gentiles

It was part of Paul's missionary strategy to begin at the synagogue

- This would be a point of contact from which the message could spread
- So after travelling through Perga to Pisidian Antioch, Paul gave an exhortation
- This is the first account we have of the preaching of the apostle Paul
- An exhortation on the Sabbath in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch

The method the church used was to send out evangelists that the Lord had called

- To pray, to fast, to release to commission in the service of a missionary God
- Not a bad missionary and evangelistic strategy for us today
- But more than a quarter of Acts is given over to:

II THE MESSAGE THEY PREACHED

It was the Canadian born writer Marshall McLuhan who said, 'the medium is the message'

- Most of McLuhan's career was given over to understanding the effects of technology
- As it related to popular culture – he became known as the high-priest of pop-culture
- It was probably McLuhan who coined the phrase 'global village'
- We take for granted that more people watch TV than go to church
- But in the 1960s this was evidence of a huge cultural shift
- McLuhan warned that 'we become what we behold'
- No wonder that we now live in a celebrity culture
- That invites us not only to wear what the stars are wearing, designer labels
- But to look how the stars, enhanced and airbrushed, look
- Even if the only way to do so is through extreme plastic surgery
- In pop culture it might be the case that 'the medium is the message'
- In my life, perhaps for far longer, Christians have been concerned about methods
- In the 50s and 60s – if only we could get people to watch a film or go to a coffee bar
- In the 70s – if only we could get people to listen to a Christian pop band
- In the 80s – if only we could get people to relate to the torrent of worship songs
- In the 90s – if only we could get people out onto the streets marching, prayer-walking
- Now none of these things is bad or wrong in itself – an attractive programme is good
- but we must not lose sight of the message – the truth of the gospel not just experience

In Acts we have the record of the apostolic message

- that kernel of Christian belief that theologians call the 'kerygma'
- and when Paul preaches, he proclaims Jesus, in much the same way as Peter did

It is a reminder that we must emphasise the content of the gospel in evangelism

- the Christian faith is essentially about God revealing himself to his people
- that revelation is set down in a book – the Bible
- the Bible says that God has spoken most clearly by his Son
- but the record of what Jesus began to do and teach and of his death and resurrection is also set out in that book
- Luke always reminds us that people gathered to hear the word of the Lord (13:44)
- That those who accepted this word honoured the word of the Lord (13:48)
- That the word of the Lord spread through the whole region (13:49)
- It may be the case that when people come to Christ they do so to have their needs met
- But there is no doubt that they stay on because they believe the gospel is the truth

In our pluralistic society people, even in Christendom, shy away from objective truth

- It is regarded as not politically correct to say that something is absolutely true
- Because saying that something absolutely true implies something else is wrong
- So we live in a society that is becoming devoid of theological and ethical absolutes
- Nothing is ever absolutely right, nothing is ever absolutely wrong
- So the pluralist says that truth can only ever be subjective – from our own experience
- People leading busy lives have little time to think about truth
- When people want some recreational time – they do not devote much of it to truth
- Instead, they find something that will keep them active (like sports or hobbies)
- Or something that will numb their senses (like TV, repetitive music, alcohol or drugs)
- Even Christian groups can sincerely but wrongly focus on experience
- Where people live in an unreal worship-world, a planet inhabited by Jesus and me

This was not the line taken by the apostle Paul at Pisidian Antioch

- Instead, Paul shows that the Lord of the Universe has been active in history
- He has not abandoned his creation and left it to run its own course
- People looking for meaning can find this meaning – supremely in Jesus
- In this brief summary of Paul's sermon, the outline of apostolic preaching is revealed
- Preaching to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who worshipped God
- Paul's exhortation begins with a resume of Israel's history from Abraham to David
- In this he gives a four-point summary of the essence of their faith
- (1) God is the God of the people of Israel
- (2) He chose the patriarchs for himself
- (3) He redeemed his people from Egypt leading them through the wilderness
- (4) He gave them a land for their inheritance
- Jews often added God's choice of David to be king
- And the promises made to him and his descendants (Psalm 78:67-72; 89:3-4, 19-37)
- Paul refers them to the passage that speaks of David's descendant as God's Son
- And he declares that the promised Son, the Messiah/Saviour has come – Jesus
- He is the Messiah that was proclaimed by John the Baptist
- Jesus was crucified
- Jesus was laid in a tomb
- God raised him from the dead
- For many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him

Here is the outline that has become familiar to us through the preaching of Peter

- 1 *Jesus was the promised Saviour*
- 2 *The death of Jesus was part of God's plan*
- 3 *God raised him from the dead as he promised*
- 4 *The resurrection was witnessed and proved*
- 5 *Jesus is glorified now and forever*
- 6 *All must repent and believe*

III THE MERCY THEY OFFERED

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

(Acts 13:38-39)

In his great sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter had emphasised repentance

- Here in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, Paul emphasises belief
- Some people want to make a fine distinction about this
- As if sometimes the gospel requires us to preach for faith other times repentance
- But this is not the case – just as unbelief spills over into disobedience
- So faith spills over into obedience (that is an about turn that we call repentance)
- The great sin of the ages has been unbelief – the call to belief is a call to repentance
- A new way of thinking, a new way of speaking a new way of acting
- Through Jesus, Paul declares, comes forgiveness of sins and justification
- For everyone who believes – it is a declaration of the mercy of God
- Paul's call to repentance is cast in terms of the verse from Habbakuk (1:5)

Look, you scoffers,
wonder and perish,
for I am going to do something in your days
that you would never believe,
even if someone told you.

The way to be made right with God (justified) and forgiven

- Is to repent and believe the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ
- Repentance is not only being sorry for what we have done, but for unbelief
- Saying I am sorry that I did not believe you, did not trust you, did not follow you
- Is as natural as being sorry for things said and done

This challenge is followed by an abbreviated summary of happened

- Some were urged by the apostles to continue in the grace of God
- But others, when the crowds gathered to hear the word of the Lord (that is Jesus)
- Became antagonistic – perhaps because they were being flooded by Gentiles
- Christianity was now disowned by the local Jewish community
- And therefore became an illegal religion
- As they leave the city, in a Jewish gesture of scorn and disassociation
- They shook the dust of their feet in protest against them