

Acts 14:21-23

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. They returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

I think it was the Monty Python team who with their typical sense of humour once asked

- What did the Romans ever do for us? A question that inspired a BBC TV series
- Actually, whether or not they did them for us, the Romans gave us a lot of things
- Before the Romans came British cooking was a stew – all in one pot
- The Romans gave us the three course meal, and imported carrots and leeks
- We won't go into too much details but Romans brought bathroom plumbing
- With lead pipes – plumbing gets its name from the Latin *plumbum* meaning 'lead'
- Italians have always been fashion leaders and the Romans were no exception
- Bringing hats, scarves, vests, pants and boots to Britain
- The Romans brought an organised military and some kind of law and order
- This was called the *Pax Romana* or 'Roman peace'
- But perhaps their most obvious and lasting legacy was their famous roads
- Watling Street, Ermine Street and the Fosse Way being three of the most famous

If you had asked the apostles the same question they could say a lot of negative things

- But they certainly benefited from at least two things
- The *Pax Romana* and the Roman roads
- The ascendancy of the Roman Empire meant the apostles could travel more safely
- Acts 14 records the travels of Paul and Barnabas in south Galatia
- Visiting the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe and their return journey
- When they left Pisidian Antioch, they followed the Roman road, the *Via Sebaste*
- Travelling 90 miles southeast to Iconium, another 20 miles southwest to Lystra
- After which they followed a track for 60 miles to Derbe

At Iconium the preaching of the gospel caused the city to be divided (14:4)

- We must learn an important lesson from this
- The good news of Jesus will divide believers from unbelievers
- There might be some who would say that the world would be a better place
- If everyone were to be united in unbelief – but how can that really be true?
- Nevertheless, a plot against Paul and Barnabas forced them to flee

At Lystra, by the grace of God, Paul was used in the healing of a cripple

- As we have seen earlier, this was parallel with the ministry of Peter (3:1-8)
- Unlike the more sophisticated city of Iconium, the population was most uneducated
- Paul did not begin his preaching ministry at the synagogue suggesting there was none

At Derbe, Luke the writer of the book that we call 'Acts' notes that the apostles

- Preached the good news and won a large number of disciples
- Before retracing their footsteps, the 170 miles back to Pisidian Antioch
- Then travelling through Pamphylia and Perga to Attalia and sailing to Syrian Antioch

It probably took considerable courage to return to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch

- Paul had been stoned by the mob and left for dead at Lystra
- The apostles had fled from Iconium because they had learned of a plot to kill them
- Paul and Barnabas had been expelled from Pisidian Antioch
- It is likely that on the return journey they confined their ministry to the converted
- And therefore did not stir up any opposition, but Luke makes little of this saying only:

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(Acts 14:21-23)

For convenience I have summarised their work under four headings

- I PREACHING THE GOSPEL
- II TEACHING THE TRUTH
- III ENCOURAGING IN FAITH
- IV APPOINTING LEADERS

- I PREACHING THE GOSPEL

Luke tells us that the apostles ministered for a ‘considerable time’ in Iconium (14:3)

- Speaking boldly for the Lord
- With God confirming the message of his grace by miraculous signs and wonders
- The mention of the Lord undoubtedly refers to Jesus the Lord
- Showing that the preaching of the apostles was about Jesus the Christ
- An important lesson that to learn is that it is not enough to speak vaguely about God
- The essence of the message is about Jesus
- In Lystra and Derbe they continued to preach the good news

In Lystra, Paul preaches for the first time in an area not influenced by the synagogue

- He could not take for granted the belief in the one God of Israel
- He had to start at the beginning with information for people without the scriptures
- He distinguished the Lord God from the pagan gods as Creator of everything there is
- Whose influence as the sustainer of all creation is felt throughout the whole world
- He is the living God who calls them to turn to him from worthless things

It is a profound lesson for the need to start where people are

- If we are going to be effective evangelists in our community let alone the world
- We are going to have to be aware of where people are
- The great problem in Britain is we assume that people know some much
- When really they know so little

As Paul continues he says that “in the past, [God] let all nations go their own way”

- But now the good news has come
- While the brief outline of the sermon does not refer to salvation through Christ
- It is hard to believe that Paul did not continue to unfold the good news of the Saviour

From the beginning preaching the gospel has not been popular

- One more than one occasion Jesus had to escape from his enemies
- For preaching the good news that resulted in his betrayal and crucifixion
- Nevertheless, despite their bad experiences, the message the apostles preach in Derbe
- Is still ‘good news’

One of the great weaknesses of contemporary evangelism is the expected response

- People speak as if a decision for Christ is something in the past
- As if commitment is something that has a day and a time

There is scarcely any sorrow that can afflict prospective parents more than the stillborn child

- The baby has a date and time of birth – but no life, it is a very great sadness
- And yet there seems to me to be the possibility of a similarly great tragedy
- The stillborn Christian
- Someone who made the decision to follow Jesus but never followed
- Who made a commitment to serve Jesus made never served
- The Greek word for ‘disciple’ (*mathetes*) literally means ‘learner’
- It appears four times in nine verses (14:20, 21, 22 and 28)
- It appears 28 times in Acts and over 250 times in the Gospels
- And it is from this emphasis on discipleship that I get heading

II TEACHING THE TRUTH

At Lystra the people fell into great error that needed to be put right by correct teaching

- In mythology Zeus was king of the gods and Hermes one of his many sons
- The Roman poet, Ovid, wrote a Latin poem, the *Metamorphoses*
- In which Zeus and Hermes once visited the Phrygian hill country,
- Disguised as ordinary men
- They were turned away from a thousand homes in which they sought lodging
- But were finally taken into a humble home by an elderly couple and treated to a feast
- The gods turned that house into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns
- But destroyed all the houses that rejected them
- Zeus was the most widely worshipped god in Galatia
- Consequently, after the healing of the lame man
- The Lystrans identified Barnabas as Zeus, and Paul as Hermes his son
- The parallel with the adulation given to King Herod at Caesarea is plain to see
- The apostles did not understand the shouts in the foreign Lycaonian language
- But when they saw sacrifices and wreaths being brought out to them
- They were dismayed – they tore their robes, in the Jewish custom, at blasphemy
- They were only men – but men with a message from God
- Bringing good news
- Paul’s sermon at Lystra has to do with the futility of idolatry
- It is teaching the truth

Again, it is an important lesson for us to learn today

- Some years ago I had in one of my church communities grandparents and grandson
- The grandparents attended very regularly but the grandson only occasionally
- However, whenever we had a special event he always like to be at the forefront
- He was not with us week by week but he liked the emotion and excitement
- His grandparents were quick to identify the reason, 'he likes new experiences'
- Well, he's not alone – most of like new experiences of the positive kind
- But being a Christian is not simply about having an experience
- Or even a succession of experiences, it is about being a disciple
- It is about being listening and learning and living the truth

In the first year of my ministry, evangelists Billy Graham and Luis Palau came to England

- As we were in London we supported the mission at Loftus Road, QPR's ground
- A criticism, perhaps justified, of previous large-scale missions
- Was that hundreds, even thousands of people came forward, and then disappeared
- The policy therefore was to refer enquirers or converts to local churches
- Who had affiliated to the mission and had promised to establish 'nurture groups'

III ENCOURAGING IN FAITH

Naturally my church was enthusiastic about arranging nurture groups and people joined them

- But as Methodists we could not really agree that it was a new idea
- As a travelling preacher John Wesley was ahead of his time
- Realising that an evangelist cannot abandon new converts
- It is like leaving small children uncared for in the maternity unit
- Wesley's great contemporary George Whitefield was possibly the greater preacher
- But he admitted that by not joining his converts to a group
- The people were like a 'rope of sand'
- John Wesley was adamant about the importance of Christians being in groups

'preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened ... is only begetting children for the murderer'.

(BE Works 21:424).

Wesley observed preaching without follow up could leave people faster asleep than ever

- But even this was nothing new
- For it is clear that on their return journey, Paul and Barnabas were at work
- Strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith (14:22)
- Part of this encouragement was undoubtedly to tell them to expect persecution
- at Iconium there was a plot brewing to mistreat and stone the believers
- at Lystra, disaffected Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium gained a hearing
- and the fickle Lystrans turned from thinking the apostles were god
- to treating them as imposters, stoning Paul and leaving him for dead
- In his letter to the Galatians (6:17) Paul interpreted his scars
- As marks showing that he belonged to Jesus
- The only positive note of this experience being the new believers of Lystra
- Who gathered round him and went back into the city (14:20)

The apostles warned the people about approaching tribulations, pointing out

- ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God’
- the word translated ‘many’ not only means numerous but various
- troubles involving direct suffering
- Christians will not sail through trouble with the greatest of ease
- Instead believers should expect hardships of various kinds
- As part of the teaching of the Christian community and the nurture of new believers
- The apostles taught that suffering was part of the package of being a disciple

This is not always the impression that we give when proclaiming the good news

- Life will more than likely be tougher because you follow Jesus
- Others will turn against you because you follow Jesus
- There may be times when you are hurt, lonely and rejected because you follow him
- Some people may go through all kinds of suffering – even dying for him
- Why would anyone want to do that? Because it is true

The apostles were

I PREACHING THE GOOD NEWS

II TEACHING THE TRUTH

III ENCOURAGING IN FAITH

IV APPOINTING LEADERS

Interestingly enough in v. 14 Barnabas is called an ‘apostle’

- While not one of the Twelve
- Nor a claimant to any special revelation like Paul
- He was probably one of the 120 disciples (Acts 1:15)
- And a witness to the resurrection of Jesus – the hallmark of apostleship

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church with prayer and fasting

- The term ‘elder’ (*presbyteros*) was a familiar one in the Jewish community
- And was used originally for Jewish leaders
- The New Testament also uses the word ‘overseer’ or ‘bishop’ (*episkopos*)
- But there is little doubt that the terms were used interchangeably and functionally
- And not as titles in a specific hierarchy of office
- Elder points to the seniority of the person
- While overseer points to the role

One of the important lessons to learn here is that biblical leadership operates as a team

- In my first circuit I introduced the stewards’ meeting
- It is a matter of local church leaders sharing in responsibilities
- Nevertheless, I am often surprised at how many people
- Who say they are committed to church leadership in a team
- Continue their own responsibility in the church unilaterally
- We need always to consider – am I looking to build the kingdom of God
- Or am I (maybe inadvertently) building my own empire

For the church and its groups to be guided aright they must have leaders

- The appointment of leaders was an important part of the life of the early church
- The appointment of the leaders was accompanied by prayer
- They prayed for guidance in the choice of leaders
- They prayed through the process of appointing leaders
- This is entirely in the spirit of Jesus who chose his twelve disciples
- After spending the whole night in prayer (Luke 6:12)
- Prayer must back their selection, commissioning and ministering

Prayer is also offered in support of leaders

- There are many references to prayer for leaders
- In eight of his letters Paul asks his readers to pray for him
- It is important for us today to pray for all the leaders in our church
- It is much easier to criticise church leaders than to pray for them

The Sri Lankan Bible commentator, Ajith Fernando, perceptively comments

- Today's commissioning services are often public relations exercises
- With a little prayer included
- And they are often followed by a time of refreshments
- Biblical services were accompanied by fasting (31:2-3; 14:23)
- And were saturated in prayer (6:6; 13:3; 14:23; 21:5).

The Missionaries retraced their steps through the missionary cities

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Finally returning to Syrian Antioch, the congregation that had sent them out

- Paul and Barnabas reported 'all that God had done through them'
- 'and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles'
- God had sent them out and God had ordered their work
- Now it was time for them to recharge their spiritual batteries
- As they remained in the fellowship for a long time