**31st May 2015**

**Acts 13**

Sometime soon we’ll all get a choice about whether we want our nation to be part of the European Union or not. The government are drafting a bill for a referendum to be had no later than 2017 and we will be given a stark choice – do you want the UK to remain in the EU or not? I can sense you are excited at the prospect of the upcoming debate and conflicting views and the dominance of the issue on the news programmes.

I don’t like confrontation. It is one thing that causes me stress and sleepless nights. Being a pastor, I always try and hope that people get on with each other – which usually involves a bit of give and take on all sides, a little bit of compromise – because we can’t all have our own way – and lots of love to oil the wheels of co-operation.

But maybe there are times when confrontation is inevitable. People have different opinions and different values and outlooks. Sometimes decisions have to be made and a choice between alternatives with little room for compromise. Sometimes there is the issue of conviction: you believe something to be right, just, good and it is therefore in conflict with what you believe to be wrong and bad and unjust.

At work, we have all come across moments when we have been uncomfortable about certain practices or attitudes. Our colleagues may have said ‘*let’s not get too idealistic or principled. We don’t want anyone making a fuss where there’s no need. Sometimes you just have to turn a blind eye. People a watching you know. Think of your family, your career, your pension. You’ll learn’*

And we realize often in life there is a choice: compromise or confrontation. A safe passage to mediocrity: or a dangerous one to getting the job done.

During the next month, starting today, our sermons are looking at the start of the church and the missionary work of Paul. We will be looking at how sometimes the church compromised and sometimes the church confronted the world in order that the gospel of Jesus Christ could advance and the church could grow.

It will make for uncomfortable reading because many Christians in the Western world today, like me, simply can’t bear to think of confrontation. We can end up in the trap of thinking that Christian mission consists of helping people to do a little bit better, become a little more comfortable where they already are, rather than the radical transformation of life that was happening in the pages of scripture. We would like it, as we read these stories of Paul telling people the simple message of how Jesus loves them, to find that people were just happy to accept it and live by it and he would have done that by gentle persuasion rather than confrontation.

But life is seldom that straightforward and people who try to pretend it is often end up simply pulling the wool over their own eyes. It’s a murky world out there and though the choice of compromise is always available in every profession and walk of life, sometimes a real choice has to be made.

Daisy has been brought for baptism today. A real choice has been made: Naomi has chosen to bring Daisy up in the Christin faith – to teach her about Jesus and to be part of his Church. We pray that later in her life she will confirm those promises and declare for herself that she will follow Christ.

When we make that statement of belief, as church members in this church do, we declare a choice and the choice should have consequences – some of which may conflict with the values and attitudes of the world around us.

Our passage starts with the church in Antioch, which is now in present day Turkey, close to the Syrian border. After Jerusalem, Antioch was the second most important centre for early Christianity and its leadership team was well known with Barnabas and Saul among them. We get a fascinating glimpse of their devotional life: fasting and prayer surrounding the worship of the Lord, waiting for the Spirit to give them fresh direction. Whether they had been expecting something like this or not, we don’t know. But to be told suddenly that the two main leaders were wanted elsewhere must have come as something of a blow.

Barnabas and Saul were full on. They were up for the real thing of being a no compromise red-hot follower of Jesus. Barnabas is introduced in Acts 4 with the nickname ‘son of encouragement. He must have had wealth – because he can sell one of his fields and he uses the money for the work of the church. This is commitment – he has spare cash and he puts it to the Lord’s work. He uses his money for the benefit of others not himself.

Saul of course was a persecutor of the first Christians. A zealous Pharisee he was struck down on the Damascus Road with a blinding vision and lost his sight temporarily. Jesus spoke to him in a vision and told him to stop persecuting his followers and instead join them. This he did, risking death. He burnt his bridges to his old way of life and was now fully in. He would change his name from Saul to Paul depending on his audience. Saul was his Jewish name but when he went into the Greek speaking world the translation of Saul into Saulos described someone who walked or behaved in an effeminate way: ‘mincing’ would be our closest equivalent. It was not a word that would help people to forget the messenger and concentrate on the message. So Paul used a regular Greek name. Paul was serious about getting the message out to the wider world. When you change your own name, you show you mean business.

You couldn’t get a pair of more committed members of your church. And now the church is told to give them up and send them off on a journey to spread the gospel elsewhere. The church hears the call of God and has the courage to respond. I’m sure when confrontation and hardship came they would have been tempted to think – we shouldn’t have done that and let them go’. But then they need to remain faith full to the call of God.

When Saul and Barnabas run into opposition they may have thought – ‘why did we come?’ Which is precisely why they would need the ongoing prayer and fasting of the church that sent them.

Barnabas and Saul take John Mark with them and they sail to Cyprus.

Barnabas came from Cyprus so its home turf for him and there is the suggestion that persecuted Christians had already spread the word in Cyprus earlier (11.19). Straight away Saul and Barnabas establish a pattern which would be repeated in place after place. They go to the synagogue to talk with God fearing Jews. It was customary in synagogues to allow visitors to speak and bring a fresh encouragement and message. Saul would use this opportunities to speak about Jesus.

In our culture, talking about religion is largely taboo. However the questions that religion addresses: why are we here, what is the point of life, is there a God, what happens after death, can we be forgiven, can we find healing – are questions everyone has. You just have to find the right moment to discuss them and how Jesus Christ can speak to each of those issues.

When Barnabas and Saul arrive in Paphos on Cyprus they meet two people in particular: the Roman governor and a local magician. Both of these individuals are important for what they signify. The roman governor will come to believe in Jesus – which will carry influence because he is an influential man. . This is a wonderful start for the missionary work of Barnabas and Saul. Some people are key influential gatekeepers – who once they change their views will have great influence on other people changing their views too.

But there is no advance for the gospel without opposition. They say that you know when the gospel has been truly preached – it either leads to a riot or revival. Certainly, Paul in Acts, as we shall see, saw many come to believe in Jesus through his preaching but also upset many with his preaching.

On this occasion the gospel is invading enemy territory and the enemy was determined to fight back. The enemy in question was the power of magic. Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas, was a magician. Magic in ancient antiquity was practised by both pagan and Jewish people with the goals of healing diseases, bringing physical blessings, cursing or otherwise harming others and guarding against both curses and demons. Magicians also claimed to foretell the future. Ancient magic involved special incantations frequently invoking the name of deities and demons, potions, and the use of magical objects such as amulets, incantation bowls or figurines.

We who live in a split level world, between modern scepticism, with a scientific, rational and materialistic mind-set on the one hand, and then a rampant culture of horoscopes, alternative therapies and healings, occult practices, dowsing, crystals, lucky charms and sayings such as ‘touch wood’ on the other.

The phrase ‘touch wood’ may derives from the pagan belief that malevolent spirits inhabited wood, and that if you expressed a hope for the future you should touch, or knock on, wood to prevent the spirits from hearing and presumably preventing your hopes from coming true. Some claim it dates back to Chaucer's time and beyond when "summoners and pardoners" sold relics which were highly questionably parts of the True Cross. The relic (in this case, the piece of wood supposedly part of the Cross) was carried in one's pocket and at the hearing of plague, death or other misfortune would be touched for protection and safety because of the belief that the Lord Jesus had defeated the powers of darkness by his death on the Cross.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Either explanation is relying on a bit of magic.

Paul has been calling on people to trust in God as seen in Jesus Christ. He looks into the eye of Elymas and sees a person full of deceit, a fraudster and a swindler and the enemy of all goodness.

Sometimes in the context of prayer, it is possible to see right into someone’s heart, even if we would rather not. When that happens, the only thing to do is to take a risk and say what we see. And what Paul saw was ugly indeed though not uncommon: a deep rooted opposition to goodness and truth, a heart level commitment to deceit and villainy and as a result an impeccable opposition to the good news of Jesus. Paul reacts sharply, declaring God’s judgement on him in the form of temporary blindness (which he himself had suffered). Did Paul hope that in Elymas’s case as in his own, this would lead to repentance and a change in attitude and an embracing of the Christian faith? We’re not told what happens to Elymas but we are told that the Roman governor on seeing this believes in Jesus. Whether his conversion was out of fear or not, again we are not told. Obviously the power at work here he cannot argue against.

This is dramatic and extreme. Was Paul right to call down a curse on this man? Was he right to pray for this man to be blinded?

In chapter 8 of Acts when Peter is confronted by Simon the sorcerer he challenges him to repent and prays that the Lord will forgive him for trying to make money out of his magic. He doesn’t blind him or pray for some ill to befall on him. The result is that Simon does repent and change.

Could we imagine Jesus causing someone to lose their sight as a preliminary to conversion and faith? Rather the opposite: Jesus is the one who gave sight to the blind and open eyes to the love and forgiveness of God. Pauls’ behaviour is questionable. There is an element of saying ‘because the way was tough for me; I’m going to make it tough for you!’

Many communities practice initiation ceremonies on those seeking to be accepted as full members. In tribal societies young adolescents may be put through tests involving physical pain and metal agony. At university many societies will have drinking tests to prove you are up to joining the club. The armed forces have had initiation practices. The secondary school I went to (many years ago I may add) the senior boys would pull the newbies into what was affectionately called ‘the pit’ in the school playground and kick you around to see if you started crying. The argument for the retention of these practices is always the same: ‘I had to put up with it and it didn’t do me any harm!’ Who says?

The way of faith and to full health of body, mind and spirit is often a painful one. But surely it is not the calling of the Christian to supply the pain. It is our calling to relieve the pain wherever possible and to bring it to an end. The fact that we have suffered the same or worse in our time should motivate us to that end. The infliction of guilt with its manifold side effects on the would- be pilgrim is a game the church has played for too long. Just because I have been made to feel ashamed for who I am I’m going to make sure you don’t have an easy ride. We were never allowed to be ourselves – why should you?

Luke the writer of Acts does not pass judgement on Paul’s tactics – he merely records what happen. The reader has to decide whether what Paul did in defence of the gospel was right or not. What is interesting is that John Mark leaves them and returns to Jerusalem. Later in chapter 15 Paul refuses to take Mark with him again and has a sharp disagreement with Barnabas about him. We are not told what the disagreement is about. Scholars speculate that Paul thought Mark couldn’t stomach the fight and ran away after the conflict in Cyprus and Paul couldn’t trust him as he was a deserter. Did he get cold feet? Was he prone to home sickness?

Others suggest that Mark, a strict Jew, objected to the way Mark objected to the conversion of a gentile, the Roman governor.

Another speculation is that Mark left the missionary team because he was unhappy with the treatment of Elymas. If Paul was going to continue to inflict physical punishments, as a technique of evangelism, on those who failed to respond to the message of love and forgiveness, then Mark wishes to be counted out.

Paul like many great leaders found criticism hard to take. However, it may be that Mark’s protest was not in vain, as Luke provides no further examples of similar practice on the part of Paul. At the same time Paul was unable to forgive Mark for drawing his attention to his lack of likeness to Jesus. It is indeed often much easier to forgive someone for being wrong than for being right.

There are some interesting sequels to his story. Mark and Barnabas will head back to Cyprus. If Mark was convinced that a wrong had been done, then he was best person to put it right. Tellingly Paul never went to Cyprus again.

Paul and Mark are reconciled in the future. Mark supports Paul in prison and attends to his needs.

There is substantial evidence in history to suggest that Mark goes on to support Peter in Rome and to write the first gospel recording Peter’s memories.

Which proves that even painful moments in the church can be used by God to bring blessing eventually.

One obvious lesson from all this is that when a new work of God is going ahead, you can expect opposition, difficulty and confrontation. That is normal. In fact one could say the reverse – if it’s only when an apparent disaster threatens, or when the church is suddenly up against confrontation and has to pray its way through, that you can be sure you’re on the right track.

How God will help you through, and how long He will take about it, is another matter. That he will, if we continue in prayer, faith and trust, is given.

Bibliography:

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1. <http://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,5753,-22199,00.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)