

## Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> August

### **Acts 11: 1-30**

The report of the phenomenal events recounted in Acts chapter 10 had spread like wildfire throughout the community of Jewish believers in Jesus.

The sheer amount of space that Peter's encounter with Cornelius takes up, both Peter's report to the church in Jerusalem (**Acts 11:1-19**) and the incident itself (**Acts 10:1-48**) testify to the importance that this story held in the life of this new faith community.

News of this quickly spread to the apostles and believers in Jerusalem. Peter had courted controversy!

### **ACTS 11:1-3 Accusation against Peter: You ate with uncircumcised men!**

There can be no doubt about the issue of the controversy: Cornelius, though a God-fearer, was not a Jew in the ways that mattered most, circumcision and observance of the food laws. That made close contact with him, such as would happen at a meal, a serious breach of the Jewish laws of purity.

In Acts 10, God convinced Peter that he should open his heart (and the gospel) to Gentiles. Now Peter must convince the leaders of the new faith community in Jerusalem that he has done the right thing.

### **ACTS 11:4-14 Peter explained to them**

So Peter explained precisely how he came to do what he had done: behave in a way that contradicted his life-long habits as an observant Jew: to enjoy fellowship with Gentiles in their home and to welcome them as fellow believers in Jesus.

Peter simply recounted the astounding events that led him to make his equally astounding decision. He tells the story from his own perspective, so he does not start with the vision to Cornelius, the first thing to have happened in Acts 10, but with the vision that he had himself been given.

Peter's explanation is essentially the story of Acts 10:1-33 with the significant variation that in the original story there is no mention of six brothers (**Acts 11:12**).

These six serve as witnesses to the things that Peter is reporting to the leaders of the new faith in Jerusalem.

### **ACTS 11:15-17 "Who was I that I could withstand God?"**

**Acts 11:17** is the key to Peter's argument

God blessed Cornelius and his Gentile companions in the same way that God blessed Peter and the apostles at Pentecost—with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter and his companions recognised the sovereign grace of God at work in the hearts of the Gentiles. To refuse to accept these Gentiles would be hindering God - opposing God's will. Peter could not do that, and by implication the apostles and believers in Jerusalem must not do it either.

Peter understood that only the Spirit of God could do what He did and the fact that He did it to, and for, these Gentiles settled the issue. It is the Spirit of God who will now define the boundaries of Jesus' kingdom and those boundaries will no longer separate Jew and Gentile as they did before.

### **ACTS 11:18 They held their peace and glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."**

God had unbarred the door that locked out Gentiles throughout Jewish history. Most significantly, with Peter's vision and the acceptance of Gentiles into faith in Jesus, God had prepared the way for the expansion of the Gospel "to the uttermost parts of the earth" (**Acts 1:8**).

What we have in these 18 verses is an account of Peter *bearing witness*. Something remarkable had happened. Something quite unexpected had happened, but something so dramatic, so obviously the work of God that it required a fundamental readjustment of Peter's worldview. What had happened was obviously not for Peter alone. A great turning point had been reached in the history of the salvation of the world. So Peter had to tell others what God had said and

what God had done. That is what a witness does; he tells others what he himself has seen and heard.

At this point Luke leaves Peter in Jerusalem, to whom he will return in chapter 12, and then again briefly in chapter 15. After that, we will not hear of Peter again, and Luke will focus on Paul.

### **ACTS 11:19-21 Scattered Jews preach**

In the far south eastern corner of modern day Turkey, 15 miles up the River Orontes, lies the ruins of the New Testament city of Antioch. During the time of the Acts it was the capital of the Roman province of Syria, a centre of trade that attracted people from many nations. It was a city of half a million inhabitants, one of the great cities of the Mediterranean world. Josephus called it the third city of the empire, after Rome and Alexandria.

Antioch had a large Jewish community and was an important centre of the Jewish diaspora. Here Jew and Gentile met, and here Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus were firmly planted as a flourishing faith community as Luke's recounting of events in **Acts 11:19ff** testify.

It all resulted from the persecution which broke out after the death of Stephen.

Some of the Jewish believers in Jesus who left Jerusalem at that time fled to the chief centres of the Jewish diaspora in neighbouring lands – Cyprus, Phoenicia, Syria - and some arrived in Antioch.

There some daring Greek-speaking Jewish believers - men from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern day Libya) - initiated a ground-breaking development by preaching the gospel to Greek speaking Gentiles. Their enterprise met with immediate success, and 'a great number believed and turned to the Lord' **Acts 11:21**.

It is surely remarkable that in Antioch so many who spoke Greek and lived according to Greek ways believed the gospel. The gospel message was utterly unknown to most of these people. It was something they had never heard before. Although we know that it was God at work by his Holy Spirit, nevertheless humanly speaking, it was the earnestness and the seriousness of the people who were spreading this message about Jesus, it was the character of their lives, it was their love for others that opened Gentile hearts to believe in Jesus.

**Observation One:** The newly emergent Body of Jesus in Antioch was made up of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in the kingdom

Note key phrase in **Acts 8:1-4** , "they were all scattered...except the apostles", i.e. Peter, James, John.

Those who were scattered were un-named men and women; un-named Jews with no special training in theology, no great evangelisation programme, no church planting expertise, no cool worship bands- just ordinary believers on fire for Jesus, sharing the gospel as they fled persecution.

Ordinary disciples of Jesus, with little or no earthly prestige, political power, great wealth, or any literary accomplishment, making disciples of Jesus.

I cannot help but wonder whether this is how God always intends His gospel to spread - ordinary people, equipped by Holy Spirit alone, to do extraordinary things in the kingdom.

**Observation Two:** The newly emergent Body of Jesus in Antioch penetrated lostness

These un-named believers, scattered from Acts 8, were specifically targeting, going to, lost Greeks who had no previous knowledge of engagement with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed the gospel message was profoundly counter-cultural. They set their face on the lost to preach the gospel to them.

Much of today's growth in churches comes from the transfer of Christians from one church to another, rather than from penetrating 'lostness', pushing back darkness.

So much of the church's thinking today is focused on creating safe environments for people to 'come to' in order to hear the gospel, but the emphasis in Acts 11 is the opposite.

Instead of building a safe environment, the believers of Antioch were 'going out' into dangerous environments, uncharted waters, across cultural barriers into no-go areas, with a radical message of 'abundant life'.

Consequences of this intentionally focused, faithful presentation of the gospel is reported in **Acts 11:21**.

So let's go; to penetrate the dark areas of our villages, towns and cities with the good news of the gospel.

### **ACTS 11:22-26 Arrival of Barnabas and Paul**

So revolutionary a tour de force could not be concealed from the apostles in Jerusalem; they sent a trusted delegate to investigate. The man they sent was Barnabas, himself a Cypriot. It didn't take long for Barnabas to recognise the events in Antioch as the work of God; the evidence of God's grace in believers' lives was there for all to see. He encouraged his brothers to continue preaching Jesus.

And the believers in Antioch had a desire to grow, to mature in the faith. A message as radically new as the gospel was to Gentiles in Antioch, took time and effort fully to absorb and fully to appreciate. It had implications for every part of life and those implications had to be identified and understood. It would require changing their thinking and their living.

Barnabas went looking for Saul both because he knew that Saul had been called by the Lord Jesus to preach to the Gentiles and because the work at Antioch was progressing so rapidly help was needed. And the believers there soaked up the teaching of Barnabas and Saul and others. For an entire year Saul and Barnabas taught amongst them.

**Observation Three:** focus on making disciples rather than counting 'decisions'

Once men and women came to faith in Jesus in Antioch, they matured in faith in Antioch. The goal was not to report numbers. The goal was to raise disciples.

We live in a time when it is easy to give intellectual assent to Jesus; easy to count the people who give such intellectual assent.

But we must call people to much much more; we must call people to radical identification with the person of Jesus. Jesus is worthy of total abandonment.

The Antioch believers' association with Jesus was no casual matter; they were single-minded, zealous, recognised as belonging to Jesus; to the extent that non-believers in Antioch referred to them by a name that designated them as a followers or devotees of Jesus, the Messiah (Hebrew)/the Christ(Greek) – Christianoi, 'Followers of the Messiah/the Christ'.

In our day let's not call people just to make a decision; let's call people to discipleship. Let's be done with nominal Christianity that dishonours the name of Jesus.

### **ACTS 11:27-30 A prophet arrives and believers respond**

Luke now introduces his readers to a prophet from Jerusalem who comes to Antioch. His name is Agabus. The implication is that Agabus is a member of the new faith community in Jerusalem. That is why when he brought his prophetic message, the disciples in Antioch believed him.

By the Spirit, Agabus prophesied that a severe famine will spread over the entire Roman world. The disciples in Antioch respond by organising a relief fund. Once the donations are collected, Barnabas and Paul carry it to the elders in Jerusalem for disbursement.

The highly effective body of believers in Antioch were equally effective in helping hurting brothers and sisters in Judea; they heard about famine, they sent relief.

### **SUMMARY**

The narrative of Acts chapter 11 leaves me reeling.

I want to be part of something in the kingdom of God for which only the glory of God can get the credit.

I want to see disciples being made, and churches being multiplied all over the place, in a way that cannot be explained by a particular fad, or trend, or leader, but in a way that can only be explained by throwing up my hands in awesome wonder, "only God can do this".

*Malcolm Parker*