

30th August 2020 – Acts 11:19-30 – The church that changed everything

If it wasn't for major shifts in technological, engineering and medical developments throughout history we would not have the advances we have today. Sometimes there are things that are so significant in history that they change everyone's lives. Just think about the combustion engine – through it the whole world opened up to transportation. Or what about the mobile phone – to be able to stay in touch with people and not have to wait for the phone connected by a cable in the house to ring. Or what about Amazon. People now don't have to get up from the sofa to buy things. In 2019 Amazon's UK sales were £13.5bn and globally they were £215bn.

These folks are examples of what we could call game changers that have affected how everyone lives today. As we follow the book of Acts today we will see through the good news of Jesus Christ being shared into a community, that an incredible game changer takes place in life of the local church in Antioch. And it's going to change everything around it. So what specifically changes?

The first thing that the good news does is it affects how they evangelise.

By this stage in the Book of Acts we are far away from Jerusalem. The gospel is spreading, but it's doing so as a result of persecution. After Stephen is martyred a severe persecution takes place against the Church in Jerusalem, and people are scattered through the land of Judea and Samaria. Some have travelled north to Phoenicia which today is Lebanon. Others have gone to sea and headed for Cyprus, and then others have travelled up to Antioch which today is central Turkey. But whilst they are scattered they are still telling people of the Gospel. I wonder if you were being attacked, in fact if you were being hunted down for your faith, what would your response be? It might be to keep the head down and stay silent. But this persecution is not shutting up these people at all. Verse 19 tells us that most of them, though, are only sharing the Gospel with other Jews. It doesn't mean that they are once again as we spoke last week reverting back to their old ways and not engaging with Gentiles. I think it's purely because they're running for their lives, the people they are around are mainly Jews – I might be wrong. But then something changes and something new takes place. In verse 20 we see people from Cyprus and Cyrene (that's in northern Africa), making it to Antioch, and they start speaking the Gospel to Greek-speaking Gentiles.

But why is speaking the gospel in Antioch such a ground breaking thing? Antioch was a massive city in the Roman Empire. It's the third largest at this time. There are over a half a million people living within its boundaries, and because it was a central hub for trade and commerce between Europe and Asia, it had this mixture of culture, ethnicity and religions. Somewhere along the line however in Antioch's history, walls were built up to fence off these different groups from each other. It's literally a city divided, where the Jews had their quarters, the Greeks had theirs, the Syrians theirs, and the Romans theirs. We might today refer to it as a peace wall, but we all know what that can do. Also, Antioch had a reputation of being very corrupt and evil. And yet, here we see in Chapter 11 that the Gospel flourished in this environment. We would think it might have the opposite effect, but instead, it flourished.

So how come they were making a difference where I'm guessing others didn't? Well we get a sense from Verse 21 that the Lord's favour was on them in what they were doing, but we

also get an understanding from the simple word 'speak' in verse 20. This Greek word means that these believers were speaking to the locals in ordinary everyday conversations. It wasn't like a sermon they were getting. They were articulating the Gospel in very understandable ways.

I hear too often from people that they don't understand the Bible. I fear that the reason why people are saying that is because they are being taught in a very complex way. We have got to tell people about the Gospel in the words of today. Long gone are the days where ministers titles are shown on boards to classify them as educated enough for teaching. These Christians were ordinary people who had a story to tell about how Jesus touched their lives. We have got to speak the good news in our every day conversations. This group of believers showed us today how to be involved with people who are far from God, who have different cultures from ours, who have different religious beliefs than we do, and how we're to learn to live faithfully and graciously and wisely among them as we just go about speaking the Gospel to them in normal conversation.

The good news affects how we evangelise.

Next, the Gospel affects how we disciple each other.

So verse 22 says that news reached the church in Jerusalem. Can you imagine the shock and concern that went through the minds of the church leaders back in Jerusalem when they heard that these laymen were sharing the Gospel with what they considered pagans in Antioch? Jews meeting with Gentiles? So what do they do? They send someone whose upstanding, someone who can bring things into order. They send Barnabas to Antioch. So we know from this passage that Barnabas is a good man, full of the Holy Spirit. The danger with the word 'Good' is that we think it means he was a nice man. But the translation of this word means that Barnabas was righteous – he displayed the character of a man full of faith. You see when people are looking for volunteers to do the job they often call upon the most gifted and talented. But that's not important here. They sent a man of faith. So here's the game changer – when Barnabas arrives in Antioch he sees what God has been doing and he rejoices with them all. Barnabas experiences what Church is like with Jews and Gentiles together, and he rejoices. He wasn't critical of what he saw. He wasn't trying to make that church to be the Jerusalem church. Instead, he was committed to helping these new believers grow in their faith.

Verse 24 tells us that a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Barnabas realised that he didn't need more reinforcements from Jerusalem. Instead, he sought now to find where Saul was. Barnabas knows him; he trusts him. And for the next year Saul and Barnabas taught the church. They invested fully in this work. And as a result of their investment here we see for the very first time that these followers are called Christians. They were so different from the culture that was around them, they didn't fit in any pre-existing box, and so they were given a new name - Christian. They shaped each other and so began the transformation from within the city.

So the Church in Antioch changes how evangelism works, how discipleship works, and finally it changes how its ministry works.

This is such an encouraging picture today of the model of Church, one we should pay careful attention to. These folks in Antioch start off as unbelievers. Then they heard the Gospel, and from hearing the Gospel, they became new believers. From there, they became active in sharing their faith. Then they grew in their understanding of God's Word. And now, they're determined to show fruit of their salvation through good works.

I don't know whether any of you were like me and were amazed at how toilet rolls and wipes disappeared off the shelves of Asda when the lockdown began. For a while it really did feel like the end of the world. But I believe many people noticed the Churches as they stepped forward to do something different in the community through Together Ballyclare. Instead of the panic that was around our streets, I believe the Church of God provided great hope. The Church in Antioch did something different also. They went into this spontaneous action of collecting goods and funds to send ahead to the believers in Judea.

So what do we learn about this model? These new believers didn't begin by thinking about themselves – they didn't store stuff up for themselves with the impending famine on its way. Instead they considered believers in Judea. There was such a sense of generosity. Verse 29 tells us that each of the disciples gave according to his ability, which means they must have been tapping into some of their reserves, and they just had enough faith and trust that God would take care of them if that famine reached Antioch. But the aspect that was the game changer was that here we see one church community helping another even though there were clear cultural differences. And it was probably really humbling for those Jewish believers to get aid and get support from the Gentiles. Isn't that an incredible picture of how the Church of God should be united. Why do we always think about ourselves?

So here folks is a model for Church that we all can learn so much from. It was a game changer back then, which can create as significant an impact today as it did back in Antioch. Maybe today has made you realise that what you have allowed church to become is really not what God wants his Church to be. As we move into a new normal, we have an opportunity as the Church of God to reach into our community, as ordinary people telling the story of Jesus in a refreshing way, shaping each other as believers for the mission God has placed in us, and reaching out with a generous heart into a community full of need. I suppose as I finish my only concern is that many of you will find the occupations of your daily life to distract you from your first call of God and that is to go and make disciples. We can keep the Church as an institution or like the new church in Antioch we can cause an incredible transformation to take place in a community. Your choice.