

It seemed that wherever Paul and Barnabas went, they **always** got themselves into trouble. And that's pretty much the point of today's reading – when you're being obedient to God, expect persecution. Especially when that obedience, is obedience to the call to mission,, expect trouble.

Paul and Barnabas said, “... **through many tribulations, we must enter the Kingdom of God....**” It's almost like they were saying, “If you're **not** encountering trouble, why not???? If you're being obedient to God, and calling a godless world to turn **to** God, well they're not going to be very happy with you, and so if you're **not** encountering trouble, why not????

Last week, Aaron preached on the 2nd half of Acts 13, and it ended in a most peculiar fashion (not Aaron's sermon – the reading):

- The word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region
- But the Jews, being jealous of what was happening, stirred up the prominent people (both men and women), and they ran them out of town...
- And so Paul & Barnabas leave, not just Antioch (don't get confused – there's 2 different Antiochs – One Antioch in Syria which was their home church that had sent them out to go into mission, and a second Antioch in Pisidia, from which they were run out of town)... But they didn't only flee Antioch – they fled the actual region of Pisidia...

That'd be like a couple of us going on mission in the shire of Maranoa, getting run out of Roma, and not

stopping in Mitchell, but heading all the way to Charleville, because it's in the Murweh shire

- And we're told, as they left **"they shook off the dust from their feet against them"**
- But we're **also** told (and here comes the peculiar bit), they **were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.**

(Run out of town, shaking the dust off your feet, and "Yeah!!! Praise God") Why were they praising God? Well, even though they were getting' run out of town, there were already some who had given their lives to The Lord. And that shaking the dust off their feet, didn't mean that they weren't coming back – oh they were coming back alright... What did it mean???

We don't like to fail, do we???

I know I don't... But here's an important lesson for us: There comes a time (and it's often sooner than most of us think) when the right thing to do, is to give up flogging a dead horse, and move on to where the Gospel may be better received.

Jesus gave us a direction that we rarely take seriously: ^{Mark}
6:11 And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

You know, people need to realise and understand, that when they reject the word of the Lord – a Word that **would** bring them life – they need to know what it is that they're doing – they need to know that there are consequences to that rejection. They need to know that **we've** done our bit – we have discharged our duty – we've come as God's representatives – we've shared with them the good news of

Jesus Christ... - if we've done our best and they've rejected that, it's on their heads... It's not **your** fault, if someone rejects Jesus, after you've told them the Gospel... But **it** is our responsibility, to **tell** them the Gospel.

And so Paul and Barnabas – they didn't say “Oh my goodness, we're such failures... There isn't any use – God obviously isn't with us”... They didn't say any of that. They knew their duty was to be obedient to God and to preach the Gospel, and when people turned to God, that was magnificent, and a reason to give God glory, and likewise, when people rejected God, and they were even thrown out of town in disgrace – They could hold their heads high, knowing that they are servants of the King, and that they can continue on in the King's mission. And they could do it with joy, because there was another opportunity, just one shire away...

And so they head off to Iconium, and as was their usual practice, first they went to the local Jewish synagogue, and we're told that they **spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed**. (I wish I could speak in that way. I don't know what way that is. I pray that when you and I speak about the Kingdom of God, that a great number of the community would believe) And then God backed the message up with signs and wonders.

But then something happened: The city became divided. I suppose everything was going along as per normal... But then Paul and Barnabas turned up and preached the gospel. A whole bunch of people turned their hearts to Jesus and believed, and then the town gets divided... What's going on?

Isn't Christianity supposed to bring peace to a place? ???
Well, what do you think????

Do you know that Jesus said ^{Matthew 10:34} "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

What on earth, are you talking about, Jesus????? I'll tell you what He's talking about:

Wherever the word of God is preached, and **some** turn to God and others do not, in that place – those people, will become divided. There is no peace between children of God and children of the Devil. There is no commonality between light and darkness. The values of the world will be very different to the values of the Kingdom of God.

And when Paul and Barnabas preached the Good News of Jesus Christ, they were calling all of the people of that town, to a radical change in their thinking about God. For both the Jews **and** the heathens, to be born again as Christians, would require a radical change in their attitude toward God. And it's the same for us in our society today.... To be born again, requires a radical change in your thinking about God.

And to those who become disciples of Jesus, this radical change all makes sense... but those who don't believe, will become incensed by the whole thing.

Romans 12:¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

But you know what? Often it's **not** possible. Sometimes it's **not** up to us. And when Christ is preached, and when sin is condemned,, the world **will** take great offence at the word of God (you can count on it). And Christians **will** be ridiculed and persecuted and demonised for holding it up as **God's** way... They'll be ridiculed for upholding God's standard for right and wrong; just and unjust; moral and immoral; sin and righteousness; freedom and bondage.....

It is God's law, by which we will be judged – not the standards I set for myself, and not the standards a community sets for its citizens... I'm going to say that again:

It is God's law by which I will be judged – not my standards, and not the standards of our nation. – A nation's standard changes – God's law does not.... And that's deeply offensive to a world who want to determine their own fate; their own destiny; and their own morality.

A week or so ago, a headline item on the news said: “A popular burger chain has apologised for allowing diners in Brisbane to donate to an anti-abortion group”¹. After you have your meal, you're given a token, to place into 1 of 3 jars. There's 3 different choices of which community group you would like to receive a donation from “Grilled” burgers (Robyn and I actually ate there a couple of months ago)...

Apparently, at one of their restaurants, a local community group who stand against state-sanctioned killing of unborn babies, were one of the 3 choices for that month... And some people were deeply offended by this. And so upper-level management removed the jar, and apologised for allowing people of Brisbane, to support that group... Basically what they said was, we're all for freedom of choice.... But you can't choose to support these guys...

God's law, is **deeply** offensive to a world, who have no trouble at all, in justifying themselves.

Just think about marriage. The current media-driven debate, just seems to go on and on and on.... – they call it “marriage equality”... and anyone who dares to speak out with a different opinion, is labelled as a “bigot”.

Have you heard any Christians speak out in the media about it lately??? I have, but it seems they've discovered over time, that there's no use at all on focusing on issues of morality or sin, or of God's word, or right and wrong.... Do you know what they talk about now???? The prominent Christians in the media who stand against same-sex marriage, have taken up the argument of a child's right to a mother and a father... (of course it's a good argument, but it's an argument that's lost already, because there's plenty of orphans and single-parent families in our community already)...

*But even arguing from **that** point of view, the media just gives them an absolute hammering, and belittles them... I heard an interview a week or so ago, when Lyle Shelton from the Australian Christian Lobby was interviewed on the ABC by Fran Kellyⁱⁱ - and the bias of the interviewer, I felt was an embarrassment to journalism...*

It's deeply offensive.

But let's bring it to a more personal level:

The gospel has always been, and continues to be, deeply offensive, because the key message is "None of us are good enough to get to heaven". We all need a saviour. I need a saviour. You need a saviour. Our children need a saviour. Our next-door neighbour needs a saviour.

We are all sinners who deserve death.

I talked to an elderly gentleman not so long ago, and I asked him if he prayed.... And he said "To me, prayer seems a lot like begging... And begging is something that I will not do..."

And you know what? In that statement, he has nailed the offence of the gospel. Somebody once described evangelism as "One beggar showing another beggar where to find bread." ...

We can only come to God **as** beggars, because (let's face it) we've got nothing to offer Him. What do **I** have that God needs??? And until we understand this, we don't understand the gospel. I cannot **be** good enough to be saved, and neither can you. And that's why the gospel message is so wonderful. It tells us about a God who loves us so much that, even while we were sinners, Christ died for us. But the offence has always been, this call to a radical change in our understanding of God.

The big-fella in the sky who's going to reward me in the next life because I've been such a marvellous example of His creation here... **That's** not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The God of the Gospel, is the God who died to save us from our

hopeless predicament of death and hell. And until I accept that, and **change** my thinking about God, I can't be saved. This is a call to a radical change in our thinking about God....

No wonder it's not popular. You're telling me I can't be good enough??? Well blow you....

We'd better move on.

The trouble that arose, was stirred up by the Jews who didn't believe. Some of them believed – some didn't.... Paul and Barnabas stayed for a long time, but when it got too dangerous for them, they had to flee.

So, they headed off to Lystra. And there, they healed a crippled man. And the people thought they were Gods.

¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

And the local priest of Zeus turns up with a bullock, ready for a sacrifice... It was a very superstitious response from the heathens, drummed up by the local priest who wanted to get in on the act... But why did they misunderstand the message? Well I'm going to give you three reasons.

Firstly, it came from their culture. An ancient legend was well-known in this region.

According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes once came to the region, disguised as mortals looking for a place to stay. They knocked on the doors of a thousand homes, and not one of them took them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, an elderly couple, welcomed them in and fed them.

In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns. And they appointed the couple as priest and priestess of the temple, who, instead of dying, became an oak and a linden tree. But everybody else who'd turned them away, had their homes destroyed....ⁱⁱⁱ (that's the ancient legend)

And of course, it's pretty clear that the people didn't want to get caught out again. And so because of their ingrained culture and religion, they looked on these men as Gods, and misunderstood the Gospel.

And you know, in Australia today, **our** culture, is something that stops many from understanding the Gospel. A culture of defying authority, of doing things our own way.... A culture that wrongly understands Christianity as a "be a good person, and you'll be right" religion. Our culture prevents many from properly understanding the Gospel.

Secondly, they misunderstood the gospel, because of the natural human tendency to worship a leader.

Some people get really caught up in glorifying the messenger . *And I heard somebody once say the 3 big temptations for ministers are the gold; girls; glory.* Some ministers are in it for the money... I don't think that's going to be a worry with Bush Disciples. Some are tempted by the women. When you're sharing pastorally with someone, if you don't put clear and firm boundaries in place, Christian leaders can get themselves into trouble... And then there's the glory (where Christian leaders delight in recognition and position and success).

You know, during my time in St George, I've had people in the community tell me how great some priests and pastors have been...

- so-and-so is such a great bloke because he went to rotary;
- This other fella was fantastic because he'd be at the pub every night;
- This other one was great because he used to settle things with his fists;
- Or this other one is just fantastic because he was the most amazing musician
- Or this other one was so marvellous because the church really grew while he was here

And then of course admiration for a leader can become an almost cult-like following, when we start talking about internationally renowned speakers... People have a tendency to worship the messenger, instead of the God who sent them.

Ummm, I don't think we're going to have that problem here.

Thirdly, we humans have a tendency to syncretism.

Syncretism is where we want to Christianise where we're at, and not change where we're at, or what we do. "I want to keep all my old ways, and I'll just Christianise them."

And so medieval kings would call a holy war – don't think holy wars are a new invention of the Muslims – so-called Christian leaders have used Christ as the call to battle for over a thousand years. The crusades; the Spanish inquisition...

And even today, a lot of Christians syncretise (is that a word?) Prosperity theology (Basically we want to be selfish and have Christ too). New age practices, where some just want to mix Eastern Mysticism up with Christianity.

But let's come back to Paul and Barnabas:

When they realised what was happening, and the people were worshipping them, they were horrified... "NO! NO! NO! We're just men. You have to turn from your old ways, to the Living God!!!"

Even so, they could hardly stop them from doing it. But then, the trouble makers from the other towns roll into town, and stir up more trouble for them, and Paul is stoned and left-for-dead.

Isn't that amazing???

"Ahhh, we worship you - you're our Gods."

"No! We're not Gods. We're just men."

"Oh, we'll kill you then."

Now, I don't know if this is a miracle of God or not, but Paul survived a stoning. To be stoned, is where you get taken outside of the city, and the residents pummel you with rocks until you're dead. And it's not just little rocks that they throw at you – of course the more merciful ones would pick up dirty big boulders and drop them on your head. And Paul survived it (probably a miracle of God).

So, they thought that he was dead, ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

No sick days for Paul – straight back into it.

And in Derbe, they preached the gospel, and many people became disciples...

And that was the end of their missionary journey (right???). All they had to do, was make a bee-line straight for home... And they would've been sorely in need of a rest, after persecutions and stonings and what-not... But no, they didn't go home, because their work wasn't finished.

They had made converts, but that wasn't it... Now was the time to go back, and to encourage them in the way of discipleship. These new Christians had been called to a radical change in their understanding about God, and now they needed some further encouragement. And we **all** do, don't we???

And so Paul and Barnabas went back to all the places that they'd already been kicked out of Lystra; Iconium; Antioch.... And one of the key things they had to teach these new disciples of Jesus, is "Don't be discouraged when trouble comes, because the path to the Kingdom of God, is a path that leads through tribulation."

We've gone far enough, and we're going to leave it at that for today, and next week we're going to hear the advice that Paul gave to new Christians and new churches. I think that's important, don't you?

First we'll have questions, and then we'll pray.

ⁱ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-10/grilld-apologises-for-supporting-anti-abortion-group/6536332>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/australian-christian-lobbys-lyle-shelton/6510908>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gaebelien, F.E., Tenney, M.C. & Longenecker, R.N., 1981. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.