



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 12th October 2008
by Mark Ashton

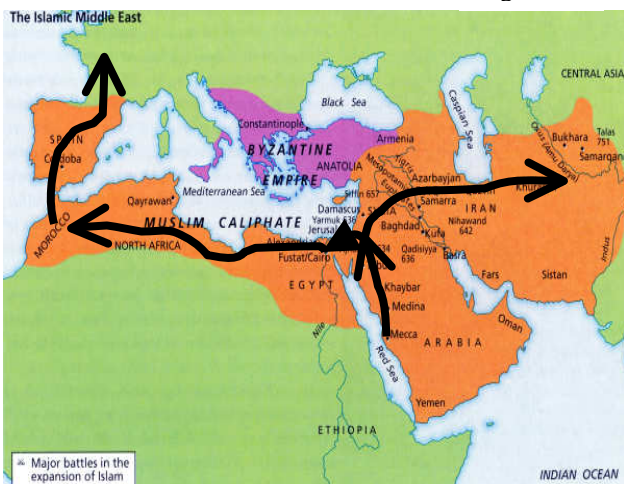
10p

Acts 14

Strange beginning

When the prophet Mohammed returned from his eight-year stay in Medina and conquered Mecca in A.D. 630, there began the most spectacular religious expansion ever. [Figure 1] With the Meccan Arabs trained as missionary warriors, by Mohammed's death, two years later, in 632, Islam had spread throughout Arabia. In 635, the Muslim armies captured Damascus, and in 636 they took Jerusalem. By 640 they had captured Egypt. By 644, they'd reached the borders of India, and within a century these all-conquering Muslim armies had spread along the north coast of Africa and over-run Spain. They had crossed the Pyrenees and were only prevented from conquering France by Charles Martel, who defeated them at the battle of Tours, in A.D. 744.

Figure 1



It makes an extraordinary contrast with the story we are looking at here in Acts chapter fourteen. Let's re-join the first missionary journey. ¹*At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.* ²*But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their*

minds against the brothers. ³*So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders* (vv 1-3).

1) Speaking the message of God's Grace

It was just a matter of a few travellers speaking about the good news of Jesus wherever they went—a message, as we saw last week, which proved thoroughly divisive, and seemed to alienate more people that it persuaded—just like today. It was just a word, just a message, but it provoked a life-changing response.

⁴*The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.* ⁵*There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them.* ⁶*But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country,* ⁷*where they continued to preach the good news* (vv 4-7).

One has to say, there does not seem to have been any well-thought-out human strategy behind this missionary journey. It seems more of a rather haphazard wandering on from one city to another, always encountering opposition, but only leaving that city when hostility turned to violence. But Paul and Barnabas were clear that this was God at work. Look on, if you would, to the end of the chapter, when they get back to their home base and they report (verse 27) on arriving there (this is Syrian Antioch) they gathered the church together, and they reported all that God had done through them, and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. It does seem to be how God works.

2) The Message Which Identifies God

Quite a few of us will know that in a few weeks time we will be sending about eighty members, young and old, of our congregation with Frank Price to reinforce another fellowship here in Cambridge. It will be the third time in the last few years that we have done something like that, and it could be nice to be able to claim that there was a strategy behind it. But those of us who have been in our fellowship during those years will know that we can't really claim there is—no carefully planned and prayed-over strategy. If someone asks me, "Where will St Andrew the Great plant next?" I have to say, "I haven't a clue." I hope by the grace of God that we may be able to plant again (and it only ever happens by his grace); but it is God who decides, not us. He decides where. He decides when. He decides who (as we each seek His will in our individual lives). We just keep on speaking the message of His grace. The word of God does the work of God, by the Spirit of God, among the people of God.

So there were no drawn swords in the hands of these missionaries as they tramped around Asia Minor (what we now call Turkey). No military might. They did not come at the head of an army. They were not part of some population migration, the result of a population explosion, in another part of the Middle East, bringing the Christian faith into a new area by sheer weight of numbers. Nor did they come as traders, nor representatives of some superior culture, in the way that the Nineteenth Century missionary movement was empowered by the British industrial revolution and colonialism, or modern Islamic expansion is fuelled by Middle Eastern oil wealth. No. These guys brought nothing, but a word, a word about Jesus—just the same word that we have today. It had a strange beginning, the Christian faith, a strange beginning.

Now, it is true there were some signs and wonders. Look at verse three. *So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders* (v 3).

But those signs and wonders seem to have had certain draw-backs.

We are told of a healing miracle which occurred at Lystra.

⁸In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. ⁹He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk (vv 8-10).

Paul could see, verse nine, that the man was responding positively to what he was hearing from Paul. But notice what follows.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them (vv 11-13).

There is some background to this in a local legend. William Barclay, in his commentary, wrote this:

'The people round Lystra told a story that once Zeus and Hermes had come to this earth in disguise. No one in all the land would give them hospitality until at last two old peasants, Philemon and his wife Baucis, took them in. As a result the whole population was wiped out by the gods, except Philemon and Baucis, who were made the guardians of a splendid temple and were turned into two great trees when they died. So, when Paul healed the crippled man, the people of Lystra were determined not to make the same mistake again.'

That, William Barclay tells us, is the background. Notice Paul and Barnabas could not have been able to understand the crowd's initial response. Do you see that there in verse eleven?: *When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form"* (v 11)!

And clearly that crowd had not understood what Paul and Barnabas were trying to say to them. That is always the problem with signs and wonders: they need explanation to be meaningful. Because

the Lystrans did not understand about Jesus, the healing of the lame man did more harm than good. Twenty years ago my younger son came home from play-school with this piece of paper clutched in his little hand. [Figure 2] It is rather faded, as it

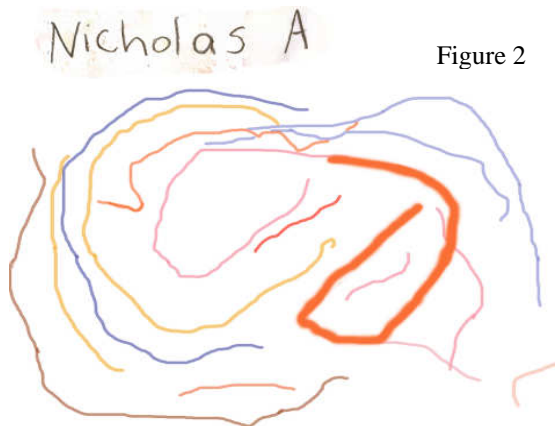


Figure 2

has been pinned up over my desk for the last two decades. Some here will know what it is like to be presented with a master-piece like this . . . and will know the awful quandary you face: “What on earth is it? How do I make an appropriate comment about it?” But the teacher had come to my aid, because, as well as Nick’s name, she had written on those random squiggles: “Snakes with their daddy.” [Figure 3]

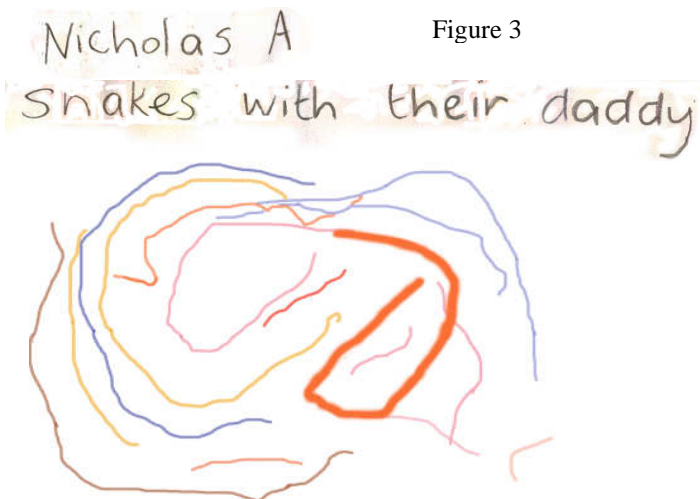


Figure 3

Isn’t that brilliant? She had brought sense out of confusion . . . with just four words! And I knew exactly what to say to my two-year-old.

How the word explains the image, and how meaningless the image or the sign is without the word! The message which identifies God. So, if you are not yet a believer, and the Christian faith is something you are thinking through, can I encourage you very much—pay attention to the word, to the message. Don’t just look at the phenomena. Listen to the message. If you are a

believer, remember it is the message, the word, that brings life. Trust it to do so. Be faithful to it.

Look now, if you would, to verses fourteen to eighteen. I am quite puzzled by the response of Paul and Barnabas, because they did not tell the crowd about Jesus.

¹⁴But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵“Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. ¹⁶In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” ¹⁸Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them (vv 14-18).

They did not speak about Jesus. Instead, notice, they attacked the basis of the Lystrans’ idolatry: “Your gods are far too small,” they said. “The true God is the one who gives everything to us, not one to whom we can give things (like bulls and wreaths) to gain his favour.” So, these Lystrans needed to grasp the inadequacy of their alternative beliefs. I think Paul had realised that he needed to start that much further back.

And it was certainly true for me that a growing conviction of the utter inadequacy of other, alternative belief systems (including, in my case, Islam) was the prelude to my conversion. If you are not yet a Christian believer, have you taken a careful and critical view of your own present world-view? You do have one, you know; and it may not be worth having. If you don’t look at it, you’ll never know, will you? Christians, have we looked at the other alternative belief systems prevalent today? And are we aware of how and where they fail? That is something we need to do.

Paul and Barnabas’ words do not bring conversion, but they do prevent the sacrifice:

¹⁸Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. ¹⁹Then some Jews came from Antioch and

Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰*But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe* (vv 18-20).

Now, do you notice the courage of Paul?

3) The Message which makes men and women brave

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead (v 19).

You might think, what a sudden change in the crowd! But I think it's very psychologically understandable. It is perfectly natural. The Lystrans' embarrassment at having tried to deify two ordinary visitors to their city would turn them quickly to think that these men must be charlatans. They must be imposters, who had deceived them with some sort of trickery, and so they deserved punishment—even lynching.

¹⁹*Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.* ²⁰*But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe* (vv 19-20).

I guess that Paul was concussed. Luke does not recount this as a miracle. One preacher, Dr. Jowett, said of Paul, "I once saw the track of a bleeding hare across the snow; that was Paul's track across Europe." He left a trail of blood behind him. Paul never forgot this incident. Twenty years later he was to write (in 2 Corinthians 11: 25) "Once I was stoned" (and, he meant that in an unpleasant way).

But it did not deter Paul from his task, did it?

²⁰*But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.* ²¹*They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch . . .* (vv 20-21).



Figure 4

And notice where they are on the map. [Figure 4] It would have been shorter to push on from Derbe to Syrian Antioch, where they had begun (via Tarsus, Paul's home town). But instead, they turned back . . . let's read on: ²¹*They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,* ²²*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* (vv 21-22).

I think it took courage to revisit those towns, don't you—particularly when they were so close to home? These men practiced what they preached. It is a question worth asking: where do men get such courage? With this feeble message they've got, as weak as they are themselves, Paul now presumably scarred, if not still recovering from what happened to him, how did they act with such courage? Well, I think it was because they focussed on the message.

Notice verses 23-25: ²³*Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.* ²⁴*After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia,* ²⁵*and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.*

Those 'elders' in verse twenty-three had to be very young Christians indeed. We are talking a few months, if not a few weeks. What a risk to entrust leadership to the local church at this stage in its life! But Paul and Barnabas knew that this work was not theirs. They did not take ultimate responsibility for it—God did.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (v 23).

In the first half of the twentieth century, foreign mission agencies struggled to make much headway in mainland China. Then at the communist revolution in 1947, they were all expelled, and the tiny Chinese church was left to its own devices. Today they estimate there are between forty and fifty million Christian believers in China (and some of them are here with us in Saint Andrew the Great this morning). God can look after his work—and has done so: witness this gathering here today. Two thousand years after this feeble, little band took their weak message around the eastern Mediterranean. It has not been a human achievement.

Look again at verse 22: ***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.***

What an unpromising sales pitch! Not through many signs and wonders, not through many miraculous evidences of God’s grace, must we enter the kingdom of God, but through many hardships. It has been said that Jesus came not to make life easy, but to make men great, and that takes hardship. But how did this missionary venture succeed? None of the power of Islam, none of the appeal of some of the beliefs around today (which promise so eloquently to make life easier for us, with personal integration and wholeness, greater comfort and happiness, and more help to authenticate our own lives and live meaningful existences). Humanly, this enterprise recorded for us here in Acts 14 could not succeed. But it did succeed. Look at verses 26-28: ***²⁶From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸And they stayed there a long time with the disciples***

You see, God was at work; He opened that door of faith, and that’s why we are all here. I don’t know if there is a Jew present. There may be one or two of us of Jewish extraction. But the overwhelming majority are here because of verse 27. A door opened, through which you and I have come to know that there is a living God. If we are Christian believers, we know that this message is true. We are experiencing that it is life-changing. If you have entered it, you will know that: you will begin to know the power of the message for yourself . . . If not, hang in there! There is no time like student days to consider the claims of Christ. It is a great day to find out about Jesus, and why this message has run through the world, changing lives for two thousand years.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)