The Gospel Centred Church
Acts 11:19-30

This week I had a meeting with a group of local Swiss pastors. And I was talking with one pastor about the history of his church. And he mentioned the name of some key figure in the history of the church in Switzerland from a couple of hundred years or so ago who had played a part in his church, and he asked me if I knew of him. And I had to admit that I had never heard of him. At which this other pastor got a bit agitated and told me that I really should have heard of him, and I was obviously in need of further education.

Now, our whole conversation was in French, and so it's entirely possible that my pastor colleague was actually talking about the captain of the Swiss national football team in the world cup and not the history of the church at all. But whoever we were supposed to be talking about I came away feeling chastised.

Now, if it's forgivable for me not to know this guy and his place in history, the same could not be said for the role played in the history of the world-wide church by this church at Antioch. Because what goes on here really is history making.

You see, throughout history, there have been some inventions, or some changes in the way people have seen the world, that forever change the way things get done, or change the course of history. Think about the wheel, or the steam engine, or the light bulb, or a heliocentric view of our solar system. This new thing, or this new way of seeing things comes along, and nothing is ever the same again. And something happened here at Antioch whose ripples continue to be felt today. In fact, it's safe to say that you, a Gentile, are sat here this morning in a Christian church in Switzerland, because of what we read about here.

Now, I don't know what you think about mission statements, because I know that some can be so vague as to be useless, but for some businesses, and some individuals, a mission statement has this power to encapsulate – 'this is what we are about, this is what we are here for'. And when the leadership and the culture of a business embody that vision, then you've got something potentially great going on there.

But what about a church? What should define a church? Because a church is very different from a business, isn't it? What are the kind of core principles, the core values, the core beliefs that should frame all it does? What should form the mission statement of a church?

Well, this morning I want us to take a look at what was going on in this power-house of a church at Antioch. And despite what I've just said, we're not going to draw a mission statement from it, instead I want us to get a feel for the character, the ambiance, the culture of this church, and see the kind of life they were living. Because it's that, what they had going on there, that if they had been living in our day, they would have then encapsulated into some kind of a statement.

Speaking the Word
Now last week we saw a Gentile Roman soldier, Cornelius get converted. And the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem responded to that by saying (11:18) 'then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life' as they realised that the world was far larger, and the boundaries of God's grace infinitely wider, than they could ever have imagined.

But Cornelius was a God-fearer. Which meant that he attended his local Jewish synagogue and knew the Bible. So even though Cornelius was a Gentile, he was still someone whose worldview was shaped by the Bible. So, still, up to this point, the gospel has not yet gone to total pagans, with zero Bible background. But all that changes here at Antioch.

And it comes about, ironically, because of persecution. It's another example of how God will take something that others mean for bad in your life and turn it for good. And Jewish Christians were forced out of Jerusalem, but the result was like scattering seed, and the gospel spread further. And as they travelled these Jewish Christians told other Jews about Jesus: v19 – 'Now, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.'

Until, that is they got to Antioch.

Now Antioch was interesting. It was the third largest city in the empire, after Rome and Alexandria. It had a population of around half a million, and it was a total melting pot. There were Greeks and Syrians, Phoenicians and Jews, Arabs and Indians, Egyptians and Persians all living in this one city, worshipping all their multiple different gods.

And Luke tells us in v20 that some of these Jewish Christians who had to flee Jerusalem 'on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also.' And that word Hellenist is just another way of saying Gentiles or pagans. So, for the first time ever you have Christians, reaching out to people with zero bible knowledge, from totally pagan backgrounds.

Now, I have two aunts, Aunty B and Aunty Jane, and they are wonderful. They are everything aunts should be, including their ability to talk. And boy can they talk. And when you get them together, without fail, they talk about two things – their health, and who's on what blood pressure medication, and their families.

Now, why do they do that? Why are they always talking about their ailments or their grandchildren? Because we talk about what matters most to us don't we? Now, I know that there are some things, things very personal that we almost never talk about. But when something is the passion of your heart, when this is what excites you, when this is what you're living for, or when you've had some good news, you talk about it don't you? In fact sometimes, like my aunts, you can't stop.

So what was so important to these guys who came to Antioch that they crossed this divide and went and spoke to total pagans about it? Well, Luke tells us in v20, that they were 'preaching the Lord Jesus.' So they go to them, not with a self-help message, not with a 6 step here's-how-to-improve-your-life-and-live-your-best-life-now kind of message; their message was about Jesus, about all that Jesus has done for us.

But, just note what Luke doesn't say. He doesn't say that they were preaching the Lord Jesus *Christ*. He just says 'the Lord Jesus'. And that's interesting because when the previous big leaps happened – when the gospel got preached to the Samaritans

or to Cornelius, each time those who took the message spoke about Jesus being the Christ, the Jewish messiah. But for these guys in Antioch, with no Jewish or Bible background, from countless different countries and continents, worshipping however many different idols, that Jesus was the Jew's messiah was meaningless.

But what wasn't meaningless was that Jesus was Lord. Because that was language they did understand. After all, Caesar was Lord, and their idols were lords. And they were used to serving lords and masters. And so these Christians take the message of the gospel to them, and they don't water it down, but they say in words they understand, 'look let me tell you about the real Lord, the Lord who loves you so much that he didn't come to tyrannize you, but to save you, who didn't come to demand from you, but gave up all he had for you. He's the Lord you need.'

But who were these guys? Who was it who stepped out like this to do what had never been done? Well, that's the remarkable thing – we don't know their names. Now, today, of course, there's incredible power in a famous name. If you want to sell your product, get it endorsed by someone famous. And sometimes it can seem as if everyone just wants to be famous, or at least promote themself. But these men do something that still reverberates two thousand years later and yet they are total unknowns.

So get this: the very first cross-cultural church, is planted in the 3rd largest city of the empire by unnamed, ordinary believers. And that tells you that you don't need a title, you don't need to be famous or have 74,000 followers on Twitter or Facebook, to be make your life count. You simply have to realise that this life is really not about you at all, or making your name great. It's about Jesus and living all of life for his glory.

And Luke tells us in v21 that 'the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.' And that's good news, because it tells us why unknowns like them and you and me can live lives that make a difference, because ultimately it doesn't depend on us, or our skill, but on God. All we have to do is be obedient where we are, but the power for change comes from God.

But if they began by talking about what God had done in Jesus, it wasn't as though once they were established they moved on to talk about something else. In fact, Antioch became this power-house of mission – taking the gospel out, planting other churches, because they started and they continued, by talking about Jesus.

But if they were *talking* about the gospel they were *seeing* something closely linked to it.

Seeing Grace

Now news gets to Jerusalem about what's going on and they despatch Barnabas to go check it out. And Barnabas was a great choice, wasn't he? Not only was he a Greek-speaking Jew from Cyprus like the men who had started this work in Antioch, but he also had this great reputation as an encourager. And Luke tells us in v23 that when he came to Antioch 'and saw the grace of God, he was glad.' He sees what's going on there, all these messed up people coming to faith in Jesus, and he sees it all as evidence of God's grace.

And that takes a certain mind-set, because churches can be messy places, can't they? Especially when you have people with different backgrounds and different expectations, and with baggage. And these new believers would have had baggage in abundance. I mean, 5 miles out of town was this big temple where prostitution was rampant. But Barnabas sees all the mess, and he sees through it to the grace of God.

And yet, he could have responded differently, couldn't he? He could have seen what *wasn't* happening, or he could have seen what was wrong, and bang on about that. But instead he sees what God *is* doing, and it makes him happy. As Ajith Fernando says of Barnabas, 'Biblical encouragers are easily gladdened!'

Now, I don't know whether you're a glass-half empty or a glass-half full type. But there's something better than that going on here. You see, when you focus on God's grace, and what he's doing, it doesn't just affect the way you see what *is* happening, it entirely changes the way you view the stuff that isn't happening – the empty part of the glass as well. Because it sees the empty part, not so much as ampty, but as opportunity for still more grace. It sees the trajectory of what God is doing in people's lives and it makes you glad. But if instead you fixate on what's still wrong, with your husband or your wife, or a church, and you close your eyes to grace, you just end up miserable, or frustrated, or both. But seeing grace makes you glad.

And Luke tells us that Barnabas saw what was going on and just poured in encouragement. Verse 23, 'he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.' And there's a sense, isn't there, that a true encourager urges you to persevere, to stay in the fight, to keep running the race, to not give up, to stay faithful. He or she doesn't just tell you the easy things, they also tell you the hard things, but they tell you in a way that makes you want to get up and go again.

And we all need people like that in our lives don't we? People who will love us enough to come alongside and speak the truth to us but do it in tender love, because they want to see us finish the race. But if we need that, then so do our kids, or our friends or our husbands and wives. So whilst we all need encouragement, we also need to be encouragers.

So, what can we learn from Barnabas to help us get there? How can you pour encouragement into the lives of others, and not get burnt out, but be glad doing it? And what can create this kind of a culture in a church?

Well, look what Luke says, v23-24, 'He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, *for* he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' So Barnabas could respond the way he did *because* he was a good man. A man of integrity. He didn't have any hidden agendas, he wasn't trying to manipulate or use others – he simply wanted the best for them. Ok… but how did he get there? Well, Luke tells us he was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. So here was a guy who had the Spirit, and the Spirit's power, at work on the inside, changing and transforming him. Ok, but how does that happen? Well, if you remember in Paul's letter to the Colossians Paul says, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God' (Col 3:16). And that is an almost direct parallel to what he writes to the Ephesians, 'Be filled with the

Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart' (Eph 5:18-19). So – can you see, to be filled with the Spirit is to have the word of Christ – the gospel, all that God has done for you in Jesus, dwelling in you richly.

And Barnabas could see God's grace and rejoice at it; he could pour in encouragement, because he knew the grace of God in his own life. He knew deep inside that Jesus loved him and accepted him because of the cross. And so he could treat others with love and grace because that's how Jesus had treated him. He could encourage others, because he knew for himself the courage that comes from the gospel, that says, 'I can keep going, I can stay in the fight, because of Jesus'. And when you know the encouragement of Jesus for yourself, you'll be an encourager of others.

But then Luke tells us one more thing about Barnabas, one more clue as to why he could respond the way he did, and create this kind of culture at church that he did. Luke tells us he was 'full… of faith' (v24). Faith in what? Faith in God. Faith in God's power to do what he was doing at Antioch. Faith in God's purpose – that it is the purpose of God to see the gospel triumph. Faith in the power of grace, the power of the gospel to see real and genuine change in people's lives. Faith in the the love of God, to draw people to himself. A faith that gave him courage and overflowed in encouragement.

And as a result of that kind of culture, Luke tells us in v24, 'And a great many people were added to the Lord' and the church grew even more.

But this being rooted in Jesus' word and his grace led to something else there. It created a culture where people dared.

Seizing Opportunities

Now the sad thing is that whether in sport or at work, you can have a good thing going on in a team, but then a new manager comes in and it all gets trashed. But that's not what happens here with Barnabas. Barnabas pitches up and the work of the gospel flourishes even more. And Barnabas sees two crucial things. Firstly, he sees the possibility for further advance. But secondly he realises that he needs help. He sees the opportunities, but he recognises his own limitations.

So, he goes on a journey to find Paul – who had been shipped off to Tarsus from Jerusalem for his own safety. And Luke tells us in v26, that 'when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.' And for a year the two of them poured teaching into the church.

Now why did Barnabas go and get Paul? Why this man and not someone from nearby? Well, they'd met before, and no doubt Barnabas wanted to invest in this young man. And maybe he saw qualities in Paul that would complement his own. But most likely Barnabas knew from Paul's conversion that God had called him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And here was Barnabas, with all these Gentiles coming to faith, and he sees the opportunity of this work spreading even more. And he thinks – I know exactly who I need.

And it's this faith in the power of the gospel, and the belief in the mission of God that gives Barnabas the courage to seize the moment, and bring Paul in. And it's that same faith in the power of the gospel that causes this church in Antioch to seize the opportunity to become a missionary powerhouse for the surrounding region. Because when you understand the love of God in Christ for yourself, and for people who don't yet know him, you don't say, hey let's just sit back and enjoy it for ourselves. Rather you say, come on, God is on the move, let's step out.

But if they were stepping out in faith – they were also standing out.

Standing Out

In Martin Luther King's famous speech 'I have a dream', he dreamt of a nation where people from multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds could live together. But this church in Antioch saw and lived that dream first. Because when you get to chapter 13 and meet their leadership team, it's made up of blacks and whites and shades in between, and Jews and Gentiles.

In fact, so successfully had they bridged these divides of race that they stood out in a city that was already a melting pot. And the people of Antioch had to invent a new name for them. Because they weren't all Jews, but neither were they all Gentiles. And they weren't all Greeks but neither were they all Arabs. They weren't of the same ethnic or social or religious backgrounds at all, and yet here they were as one.

So what name do you give a bunch of people who are so totally different from one another but are sticking together? You pick the thing that they have in common, that unites them, that makes them stand out. And Luke says in v26, that 'in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.' It's Christ that had united them. The gospel has created this stand out community that draws all these different people in, because it has this power to bridge these divides, because when you know that Jesus has loved you, and that he has loved your black brother, or your Gentile sister, you're going to start loving them as well.

But this love was more than talk. When this church gets advance warning through the prophet Agabus that a famine is coming. They don't just retreat to the hills or turn inside. Luke tells us, v29, 'The disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.' They love practically. They mobilise their resources to serve the poor in the church down in Judea.

So as grace flourished in Antioch, so did generosity. Because when you understand God's grace, you understand just how generous He has been to you, and it opens your hands in acts of generosity for others. And the concern of a church rooted in the gospel as this one was, was not to build its open empire, but to build the kingdom. And that outward looking generosity had other people looking in. It was this stand-out counter-cultural movement called Christianity.