

## “Christ Church Antioch”- Acts 11:19-30 - CCH Sermon 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021

### v21

- I wonder if you ever browse other **church websites**.
  - It's an interesting activity-
    - figuring out what they stand for,
    - hearing their story and origins
    - Snooping on what they are up to.
  - Maybe someone with us today came to us having snooped on our website, or even our youtube channel, and you are MOST welcome.
  - Well today we are going to snoop on another church.
    - It doesn't have a website because we are going back 2000 years ago,
    - It's the early church in a place called Antioch (Antakya in modern day SE Turkey).
    - I'm going to call it “Christ Church Antioch”.
  - It's a really key church in the book of Acts-
    - one in fact that became the launching pad for Paul's missions to the rest of the Mediterranean.
    - A flagship church.
    - And in a sense the launching pad for mission to Europeans like many of us.
    - Some have called it our “mother church”- the first truly NonJewish church.
  - We're going to see their early story through the lens of four key activities that they were involved in.
  - But just in case we're tempted to think this is a dry and dusty academic exercise, we're going to see there's masses we can learn from “Christ Church Antioch” for us as Christ Church Huntingdon, for each person listening today.
  - So let's look at the 4 paragraphs of this section under 4 activities
    - Evangelism
    - Encouragement
    - Teaching
    - Partnership
- But before we do, we better get our bearings on where we are...
  - Here's a map.
  - Story so far: Jerusalem-Rome. Judea. Samaria. Joppa, Lydda, Caesarea. v19.
    - It picks up the story from where we started this series in 8:1 *“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria”*.
    - Remember God is in control, and he's using all things, even persecution to get his people, and therefore his gospel out where he wants them.
    - 11:19 *“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews”*.
  - A few things to know about Antioch...
    - Antioch was quite a **way** from Jerusalem- 10hrs by car, days of travel back then.
    - It's **big**. The third biggest city in the Roman empire according to Jewish historian Josephus. Probably 1/2M people- think modern day Leeds, or Leicester or Edinburgh.
    - It's **cosmopolitan**. Like many cities today a melting pot of different nationalities- Roman, Greek, Jewish, Locals.
    - It's **worldly**. Pagan practices, temple prostitution. Not necessarily the kind of soil in which you'd expect the gospel to grow.  
But it did!

- And the big really significant thing happens in v20.
  - Cyrene- north Africa.
  - Cyprus- where in fact Barnabas (who we will meet shortly) was from.
  - Telling the good news about the Lord Jesus to **Greeks**.
  - Now in case you haven't been turning in in recent weeks this is ground breaking.
  - It's "unexpected"- the title of our sermon series.
- As we saw with Peter's vision and Cornelius' conversion, the gospel is now going out to the most surprising people: non-Jews.
- That's not controversial for us, I think no-one in our church is from a Jewish background.
  - But it was a massive deal back then.
  - The gospel smashing down the Berlin Wall of division between Jews and Gentiles.
  - And some of these early missionaries to Antioch got that!
  - They share the good news with Greeks.
- **And it leads us to the first activity of this section: EVANGELISM. (v20-21)**
- v20
  - The church began with evangelism.
  - Believers brought the good news to unbelievers
  - including really unexpected people and a church was planted.
  - Look carefully at v21. GREAT NUMBER!
- Before we move onto activity 2, I want to us to think about a couple of things here.
  - First I want us to see that this is a **dual** activity.
  - In fact all of these activities involve the actions of people and of God.
  - But the divine side is particularly stressed in the first two.
- Look carefully at v21.
  - "The Lord's hand was with them"
  - Why was it a successful church plant?
  - Why did it last?
  - Why did a massive number of people repent and believe?
- It's not because they had done a Hopes and Dreams survey.
  - Nor because they had the perfect number of kids workers for every Sunday
  - Or because their tech team could livestream a service with their eyes closed!
  - Nor was it because they had the perfect pastor
- Awesome as those things would be.
- It's because the Hand of the Lord was on them.
- Now let's never forget this....
  - The key to church planting.
  - The key to church growth.
  - The key to church health.
  - The key to church survival
    - **Is the Lord!**
- It's obvious.
  - But we so often forget it.
  - Christ church Antioch only existed by the Grace of God.
  - *"The hand of the Lord was with them"*.
  - If God removes his hand of blessing, the church would disintegrate.
  - Christ Church Antioch would cease to exist
  - Christ Church Huntingdon would cease to exist.
- But then the other flip side of the coin.
  - Evangelism is primarily a work of God in converting someone from unbelief to repentance and belief in Jesus Christ.
  - But it involves human activity too. Human words.

- God was at work, so humans were at work.
- God as he did at Pentecost, strengthened everyday believers- [we aren't even told their names- they are everyday heroes like you and I can be]- to share the verbal message about Jesus. They couldn't leave it to others.
- They went to the town, they got to know them, and they told them good news, about Jesus Christ-v20 THE LORD JESUS.
  - He's Lord.
  - He's not a swear word
  - He's not one opinion among many in the smorgasbord of religious ideas.
  - He's LORD JESUS.
  - He's the King who made us, who we've horribly ignored, who will judge us, but who loves us and came to die for us
- If you've never done so you can turn to him today and join the crowd of v21. "believed and turned to the Lord".
- That was activity 1. EVANGELISM.
- And may the hand of the Lord be on us this week, so that we can share the good news of the Lord Jesus and as a result a great number believe and turn to the Lord.
- The danger with our church is that we grow through transfer. While inevitably, Christians move into the area, and we welcome them- we need more harvest workers, we want to grow by seeing people become Christians.
- Let's pray for that, let's work for that.
- Let's move to activity 2, which is what happened next in the establishing of Christ Church Antioch.

• **ACTIVITY 2 (v22-24) ENCOURAGEMENT.**

- Here the story shifts from these unnamed anonymous heroes to one of the named heroes of the book of Acts (and in fact mentioned 33 times in the New Testament). BARNABAS.
  - Do you know his name means "Son of Encouragement".
  - And that's exactly what he was doing.
- He was sent out by the apostles to check on and to nurture the early church.
- It's interesting. In previous stories- eg the conversion of the Samaritans, apostles came from Jerusalem to check for themselves what God was doing.
- But here it's not an apostle from Jerusalem but an envoy.
- Maybe that's a sign that the work was becoming too big and spread out for the apostles alone to be the leaders, or maybe (and I think this is the case) they picked a very strategic person who was better placed to do this reconnaissance work by his background.
- Barnabas.
- He's first mentioned in 4:36 as himself coming from Cyprus. So he would himself have been conversant with some of the Mediterranean cultures of Antioch and ideally placed both to check on and build up the multicultural church, more so than someone who'd grown up in Judea.
- And he wasn't disappointed by what he discovered.
  - v23a "When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done"
    - Again do you see God's activity amidst human activity?
      - God's hand. their hand
      - God's work, their work.
  - "He was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts". v23b

- ENCOURAGEMENT: It was a combination of persuading them to perseverance and wholeheartedness
    - Perhaps it involved formal teaching (though we'll major on that in the next paragraph)
    - Perhaps it was just informal chit chat.
    - But Barnabas was such a positive influence on their early Christian lives.
  - Some people are just like this, they have a real gift.
    - Just a short time spent with them, and you find you want to keep following Jesus.
    - They have a wonderful ability to point you onwards in your Christian life.
    - There are so many reasons to want to give up in the Christian journey, or get diverted to some false road. Just read or watch Pilgrim's Progress.
    - We need encouragement.
  - Some of you in this church have this gift, and can I encourage you to fan it into flame. Don't stop doing what you are doing- backing people in their Christian walk, and urging them onwards, through the difficulties.
  - Keep telling people to run the race, to keep their eyes on the finish line..
- We particularly need it in the early days of our Christian faith-
  - if you are a new Christian ask for a godly mentor who will read the Bible one to one with you and help you.
- But old hands timers need it too.
  - It's easy to get weary.
- Do you know we often mention John Stott, an Anglican leader who died 10 years ago...
  - We're still talking about him because he wrote such helpful books. eg BST.
  - But do you know that he said one of his greatest temptations for Christians and for him personally was discouragement.
  - Here's a massively godly, brilliantly bible focused teacher and evangelical strategist, who was ranked by Time Magazine as one of the most 100 influential people in the world and yet he said he easily got discouraged.
- We all need encouragement.
- It's God's work- look at v24.
- But it's our work.
  - So please- encourage your brothers and sisters. Young Christians, older Christians.
  - As you go to lifegroup on Thursday lunchtime (and please don't see it as an optional extra), don't underestimate how simple, kind, Christian encouragement might help your brothers and sisters keep going one more week!
- **ACTIVITY 3 (v25-26) TEACHING**
  - I didn't know whether to merge this with the previous paragraph, but I think it stands alone because compared to the previous encouragement, it looks like more formal content. But I can't be totally sure.
    - Anyway cue the arrival of Saul.
    - Interesting it's still his Aramaic name.
  - Barnabas knew his limits, he knew Christian ministry is teamwork,
  - and he knew Saul's gifts.
  - Here's where his ministry really started to take off in the book of Acts.
  - If I've understood this rightly, I think this is really humble of Barnabas. He was primarily an encourager, he knew Paul was gifted beyond him in Christian communication.
  - So he made a 300mile round trip to Tarsus (round into Turkey) to track down Paul, who had been sent back home (in ch 9) after his life was in danger following his conversion. (Probably 7 or 8 years earlier putting all the timelines here and in Galatians 2 together).

- The main point is that this young fledgling church full of young Christian converts needed teaching.
- So Paul and Barnabas embarked on a year long Discipleship Training Scheme
- I think this is important to grasp.
- A church will be lopsided if it doesn't grow.
  - It's not enough to come to faith. It's not enough to persevere in your faith. You need Bible teaching.
- At CCH we have 3 priorities.
  - Loving Jesus.
  - Loving one another.
  - Loving Huntingon.
    - Discipleship
    - Fellowship
    - Evangelism.
  - Now they are all overlapping (and they are a different set of titles from our sermon today), but if we only did evangelism, we would soon burn out, not having time to regroup. Actually I think that's really important post lockdown.
  - Having said that, if we are only inward looking, we'll soon rust out, because our faith could become stale and inactive, and there's a vitality that comes from being on the front line of mission.
  - As a church we've tried to balance these upward, inward and outward facing activities.
- But I would like to emphasise how **key** teaching is to the health of the church.
- Paul in his letter to Timothy warns against false teaching spreading like gangrene (2 Tim 2:17).
- versus healthy sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:2).
  - Far more dangerous than persecution (which normally stimulates rather than stunts church growth) is false teaching.
  - It's why it's a huge responsibility to be in this pulpit, and those who teach will be judged more strictly.
- I like how that paragraph ends.
  - v26 *"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch"*
  - They are clearly different from the Jews by this stage.
  - And the dwellers of Antioch, who apparently loved to give people nicknames, called the Christ people "Christianoi".
  - Apparently that's a mix of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, which gives a flavour of the multicultural nature of the place, but wonderfully the multicultural nature of the church.
  - And great that today, we are known as Christians. Clearly associated with Christ. May we prove worthy of that title.
- Let's look at the final paragraph before closing with a couple of questions.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> ACTIVITY (v27-30)- PARTNERSHIP**

- God gives guidance to his church through a prophet Agabus (who features again in chapter 21) that there's going to be a serious famine across the area, something which is confirmed by the history books in the time of Claudius (41-54AD).
- Again it's clear that God is at work here granting supernatural insight into events. His work leading to human work.
- And it gives rise to an amazing example of partnership.
- The Antioch believers decided that they would raise funds for the disciples in Jerusalem and surrounding area, by having a collection.
  - And note a couple of things about this collection...
    - It's **proportional** (according to their ability)

- It's **voluntary** (it's their decision)
  - It's **carefully executed** (by sending the gift to and via appropriate and trusted individuals).
  - And perhaps like the collection in 2 Corinthians 8&9 it's **symbolic** of the gratitude that these gentile Christians are showing for their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters from whom the gospel first originated, and a mark of solidarity together.
- It's quite an amazing paragraph. Partnership- we'll see more of that as we see Antioch being a base for mission into the rest of the Mediterranean with Paul's missionary journeys, but it starts here with finance.
- ▲ I was struck by having Helen Burns with us at our prayer meeting last Wednesday. She works with Crosslinks to promote the work of mission in churches, and as with all mission there's a need for finance, not least for the office and the organisation themselves (as well as the mission partners).
  - Those with plenty giving to those in need. Different churches across God's world acting in partnership to support Christians and reach unbelievers.
  - Actually this is even more basic- it's meeting the needs of Christians who potentially would have starved without help.
  - Perhaps it's time to review our giving, and think about whether we are giving according to our ability to those in need. Yes Covid has left some of us with less money, but actually it's left many of us with more money. That should make us stop and reassess our giving.
- We've seen the planting, growth and networking of the church in Antioch.
  - As we conclude I think it's worth using this model church as a health check for us.
  - We'll do more of this in our lifegroups this week.
- As a church how are we doing in these 4 areas?
  - Evangelism
  - Encouragement
  - Teaching
  - Partnership
    - Where are the weaknesses, and what could we improve?
- And individually it's good to ask, of those 4, which is my strong point, and which is my weak point.
- Personally, I know I have a heart for Evangelism, and I spend a lot of my job teaching. But am I always good at encouraging people, spurring them on in their faith? That's my takeaway today.

#### **What's your weakest point?**

- Evangelism, Encouragement, Teaching, Partnership? Where are u Tempted leave to others?
- How are you going to work at that this week?
- You've been forgiven. God has been at work in you. His hand is with you.
- Now get on and be at work for him!
- Don't do it in your own strength. "The hand of the Lord was with them".
- So let's start by asking for his help now.

#### **Which is your strong point?**

- Which of these comes easily? Perhaps you are constantly using your money to support other Christians or you are a natural evangelist.
- Great. Well can I encourage you to keep working to your strengths.
- God has given you a gift in this area. Fan it into flame with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Christ church Antioch- a model for Christ Church Huntingdon.

Let's pray.