

Hearts Aflame: A Passion for Reality ... Acts 13:1-13

We're all familiar with Murphy's Law. #1: Nothing is as easy as it looks. #2: Everything takes longer than you think. #3: If anything can go wrong, it will! #4: Smile. Tomorrow will be worse.

When we take a look at the church in the twenty-first century, it seems to me that the mindset of Mr Murphy's Law is alive and well. As believers, though, we need to face reality, we need to bite the bullet, we need to understand that following Jesus can be incredibly demanding and tough.

Serving Jesus in a multi-faith society, a society where Islam is seeking to be top-dog, is challenging. Walking with God in a pagan environment is not like going for a stroll through Disney World – sometimes we can be dreamy idealists, living in cloud-cuckoo land, when all of the time we'd be much better off as down-to-earth realists.

That's the theme woven into the fabric of this pivotal chapter in Acts – it's a stirring appeal from the burning heart of the great apostle, he says: don't be phoney, let's be real. A passion for reality! He's looking for you and I to take off the rose-coloured glasses and be the Real McCoy.

There are three types of people in today's world: one, those who make things happen;

two, those who watch things happen; and, three, those who wonder what has happened. The same is true of churches: some churches are dynamic, reaching out with the gospel to make an impact on the world; some know that God is moving in other churches and wonder why they aren't experiencing that power; still others just barely exist, they are languishing while the weeds grow – they make an impact only on their members' social lives, they're more like a country club with a Christian ethos.

When I look at the church in Antioch, it's thrilling to see what is happening there. It pays eloquent tribute to the matchless, marvellous grace of God. Read all about it in Acts 11 – there was a good church that has become a great church; they were the first beachhead of Christianity in the pagan world. They got off to a fantastically good start – it's impressive; scores of people came to Jesus: we read in 11:21, 'The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.' The church grew by leaps and bounds! And it was from this church that the flag of Gentile missions was unfurled.

Guess who the preachers were? It was those who ran to safety when the first tidal wave of

persecution swept across the area in the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom. These guys were bold and gutsy, they were willing to pay the price; they didn't cool off, in no way was the fire dampened down; in fact, it was as if a man had thrown a lit match in to a tank of petrol. The gospel triumphed! These men were real – they were real people, with a real faith, trusting in a real God.

Luke reminds us in 11:26 that it was in Antioch that these folks were first called 'Christians'. Back then, that was a slanderous term, it was intended to be something derisive – every time it was uttered, it was said with a sneer and a smirk. To be honest, the believers in Antioch rose to the challenge – they rallied the troops and they wore it as a badge of honour. They held their heads high, their pride was not in who they were but in what Christ had done for them! A passion for reality – that's what they had, big time.

The first point to note is the commission of the church, that's in verses 1-3. The first verse is one of those verses that we could so easily skip over; if we do, we'll miss out on so much info – you see, here was a church with the right stuff. This is 'church' as God intended it should be.

Here's a quickie summary: it has spiritual leaders, with a rich spiritual ministry, who went on a spiritual mission; in no time at all

they faced hostile spiritual opposition, but they ultimately experienced spiritual victory.

I have used one word five times in the last few moments – the word 'spiritual' – this was the gold standard, the distinguishing hallmark of the church at Antioch. They were a Spirit-filled church, a church energised in the Spirit, a church empowered by the Spirit, a church engaged with the Spirit – put simply, a church on fire!

There were five men in the church who exercised a prophetic or teaching role. These guys were the A-team, they were the heart of the ministry at Antioch. With a team like that in place, it's no wonder the church was a strong church with a robust faith and an expansive heart for the things of God.

Prophets played a key role in the apostolic church – they wore two hats: one, they would hold forth the word of God like any preacher would do; two, in foretelling what God had revealed to them. Either way, their role was to tell people what God had told them. We don't have men acting in that capacity today, we have the full and final revelation of God in his word.

Teachers were there to do precisely that – they were to instruct the believers in the things of God. They were enabled by the Lord to expound and explain biblical truth. Their role is crucial and critical in every

church – we need to hear God’s word from the lips of able men, men who handle it correctly and men who seek to live by its timeless principles.

The church at Antioch was blessed with men of the Book – five men who were passionate in their commitment to Christ and his church, a handful of men with a huge passion for souls and for people, men with a passion for reality: we see that expressed so beautifully in their diversity.

Look at them! Barnabas is first on the hit list – he was a great encourager, a wonderful man to be around, he tended to see life sunny side up, he was a Levite from the island of Cyprus; then there is Simeon called Niger – he was a black man, possibly of North African origin; Lucius was from Cyrene, which was west of Egypt on the north coast of Africa – his name was Greek so he was possibly a Gentile; then we have Manaen who had been reared as part of King Herod’s household as a foster-brother to Herod Antipas, the butcher who killed John the Baptist – he was a member of high society; finally, there was Rabbi Saul – he certainly needs no introduction.

Did you see that? A bit like liquorice all-sorts: a Cyprian Jew, a black man, a Gentile, a toffee-nosed aristocrat, and a rabbi – this was a truly cosmopolitan leadership team. It was

a racially integrated bunch of go-getters. So different, so distinctive, so united, so effective – the church at Antioch was a microcosm of what the church would become in the world. Today’s church is a global community, an international family. What we see now is a curtain raiser to what heaven will be like – in that day, says John in Revelation 5, an uncountable number of people will gather before the throne, and they are there ‘from every tribe and language and people and nation’. This is not pie-in-the-sky, it’s not wishful thinking – thank God, this is an unshakeable fact, it’s reality.

It was also the perfect profile for a missionary church. It was the godly missionary to India, Henry Martyn, who once said: ‘The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to him, the more intensely missionary we must become.’ That’s the reality that Paul and Barnabas discovered in verses 2 and 3 when God called them to move on.

It’s interesting to note that it all happened when they were busy in worshipping the Lord. They were ministering in his name. At the same time, they were also fasting – these guys were real, their level of commitment is high; in fact, they are so dedicated in their pursuit of God that they are willing to say no to some of the nice things in life. They want to zero in on the Lord.

It paid handsome dividends for them and for the church – it was like dominoes falling, it triggered off an amazing response from near and far. There's no way that God was going to send forth a couple of guys who were hanging out somewhere, twiddling their thumbs. The people God uses are those who are up to their neck in ministry already. The people God trusts in his business are those who have a proven track record. Saul and Barnabas went on their mission trip with the full backing and blessing of the church at Antioch. They had their support and that's the way it ought to be.

The second point to note is the mission of the church, and that's suggested in verses 4-5. Saul and Barnabas didn't know it, but God is on the verge of using them to launch a global initiative – the Great Commission is to the ends of the earth. God's plan to reach the remotest part is set in motion. There is anticipation, a surge of adrenaline. Wow! This is it, folks!

The local church gave them their blessing, but the Holy Spirit gives them his authority. Paul and Barnabas were not masters of their fate or the captains of their souls. Christ was! As they set sail to Cyprus, they had no idea what their future held, but their confidence was in the unchanging character of God. It was God who chose them, it was God who called them

– they were going out in his name, and they were going out to tell the world about Jesus. There was a buzz, these guys were animated, they were really up for it. They were just so excited. They were ready to take the world for Jesus. Cyprus was a good start point – it wasn't too far away, Barnabas knew it well, there was a large Jewish community. They were trusting the Lord for great things.

When they got there, they didn't waste much time on the tourist trail, it was straight down to business. They preached the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. They trekked all across the island, from east to west, declaring that Jesus saves.

Cyprus was known as the Happy Isle – a first century Bahamas or Hawaii. However, like a lot of places, the reality is so very different, people were miserable, their lives were empty – it was lots of sun and sea, sand and sin! But that's what mission is all about – it's taking the gospel to people who need to hear about Jesus.

The third point to note is the opposition to the church, we see echoes of that in verses 6-8. The devil is never too far away when the showers of blessing start to fall – he doesn't like it when the gospel makes inroads into his territory. There's no way he'll sit back and take it on the chin; he'll fight back!

That's what the missionaries discovered in Paphos – they met two men: one was intelligent, according to Luke, he was the Roman Governor. It seems that he was weary of materialism and idolatry, he was looking for something more substantial in terms of religion, he was searching for reality. So much so that he sent for the preachers to come and visit him – he wanted to hear the word of God for himself.

The other guy was a sorcerer and a false prophet – he was at the beck and call of the Governor. He was into the occult big time; he was an evil man with immense power. He was no more than a puppet on the devil's string. That said, he had a fair bit of say over the ruler of Cyprus. He went so far as to try to discourage and dissuade him from embracing Jesus Christ in verse 8.

Yes, when the message of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, when the gospel of grace is declared, a major battle is inevitable, sooner or later. Spiritual warfare. There's a conflict because the devil won't give up or give in easily. It happens today, it happened then – it's a bare knuckle, heart-thumping confrontation. It can be scary at times, but this is par for the course.

There is a price to pay if you want reality – never share your faith and you will never look like a fool; never stand for truth and you will

never be rejected; never turn off the telly when the air is blue and you will never be called a wimp; never reach out to the needy and you will never be taken for a ride; never give your heart and it will never be broken; never go door knocking or giving out tracts or go on a missions trip and you will never be subjected to a dizzy confrontation with the devil.

However, if your craving is for reality, if you want Jesus, if you have a passion for God and his people, if you have a passion for perishing souls, then you will experience a roller-coaster ride of emotions. There'll be the highs as well as the lows – but you'll know the joy and thrill of adventure with the Lord.

For Saul and Barnabas, the heat was on! The final point to note is the victory of the church in verses 9-12. Did you see how it all panned out? Saul stood his ground; with an unflinching eye, he stared the old boy out, he told him a few home truths and he didn't mince his words in the process – he was struck blind.

As a result of this divine intervention, the proconsul believed in the living Lord – we read in verse 12 that 'he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord'. One up for God, one more nail in the devil's coffin! There is the triumph of grace, there is the power of

the gospel to change lives from the inside out.

The battle was fought, the victory won! One man went from the light into the dark; the other man emerged from inky black darkness in his soul into the bright shining light of the gospel. If this story does nothing else, it's a wonderful reminder of the ability of God to do what he does best – he changes people.

I reckon, in this section, we see six marks of a highly effective church – a church with a passion for change, a passion for true fellowship, a passion to serve, a passion for souls, a passion for people, and an unquenchable desire for reality.

In your church and mine, we need a spiritual renaissance, and we need it now; this is the time for us to move on with God, to move out of our comfort zone, to crank the engine up a notch, to discover afresh the contagious passion of the early church. Two millennia along the road, the God who has done it before is the same God who can do it again.

An Acts Twenty-nine Church is a church where people burn for Jesus. Yes, that's why we long for the sovereign Lord to come among us: to burn up the dross, to fan the smouldering embers, to set our faith on fire, to set our hearts aflame.