

18/2/09

Acts 13 & 14

midweek

File: Acts 13-14

I don't know about you but I want to change the world. I want to live my life in such a way that it will affect people, it will change people, it will make a difference. I don't want to live a ho hum existence. I don't want to just live for myself. I want to make an impact, a positive impact on the people around me. I want to leave this world a better place than what I found it. I want to make my life count.

And that's why I am a minister. That's why I left my job as a Chartered Accountant because I thought there had to be more to life than just climbing up the corporate ladder, more to life than just making money. More to life than just looking after number 1. And I'm in the ministry because I believe, I truly believe, that I can make a difference to this world by introducing people to the Lord Jesus. By showing them by word and deed that they can have a personal relationship with their Creator.

And so, I am naturally drawn to a figure like the Apostle Paul. For here is someone who actually did make a difference with his life. Here was someone who helped change our world. Here is someone who was called by God. God said him *"I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the very ends of the earth."*

And that's what the Apostle Paul actually did. He did change the world. He wrote almost a third of the NT. He went on three missionary journeys. He planted Churches all over the Roman Empire. He introduced people to Jesus. He made his life count.

And the story of the Apostle Paul is found in the book of Acts. A thrilling story of a man who wanted to make a difference. A cracking story told at a ripping pace, packed with action, adventure and the touch of the divine. But this evening I want us to start at the beginning. How did it all begin? What did Paul do in the early years, after his conversion. How did he take the first steps, steps that would eventually lead to him leaving such huge footprints? I want us to look at Paul because if you are committed to changing the world he might help answer the question, where do we start?

I remember that one of my first jobs as the Presbyterian minister at Tweed Heads was not preaching a sermon, not leading someone to Christ, not planting a Church, but it was carpeting the back room in the Kingscliff Hall. That's right. I had just finished three years of theological study, I had spent countless hours learning the Greek and Hebrew languages. I had poured over books about Christian counselling and leading a Church but when I arrived here we needed some sort of a cry room at Kingscliff for the Church families so I bought some old carpet from a Garage Sale and laid it with nothing but a bread knife to cut it to shape and a few nails to keep it in place.

I remember that my first job when I graduated from University with a Bachelor of Economics Degree and I had joined one of the biggest auditing firms in the world, my first job was go to a shipping firm and add up their general ledger. It took me four full days of punching buttons on my calculator before I proved that the computer was adding it up 100% right.

So what did Paul do, first up, after getting his incredible commission? Well last week we saw that he preached in the synagogue of Damascus and had to escape from that city in a bucket through a hole in the wall because of the persecution of the Jews. He then went to Jerusalem to preach the gospel there and was subsequently kicked out of that great city.

So it wasn't a particularly auspicious start, was it? So what did Paul do next? Well he went home to Tarsus. And for the next 8 years we know almost nothing about what he did or said in this his home town. Paul's first challenge in changing the world was not taking on the might of the Roman Empire, it was not debating with the Greek philosophers in Athens it was being faithful in his home city for the next 8 years. 8 years.

Paul's first real job was not something great, it was something relatively small. It was to study, to think, to formulate, to pray, to plan, and to preach in his own town, amongst his own people, face to face with his own relatives and friends.

As the proverb goes, "The start of a great journey begins with a single step". A great building starts with a relatively small foundation stone. And if we are going to change the world through serving the Lord Jesus, it often starts with us faithfully doing the little jobs, not the big ones. It may mean starting at home, not abroad. And it will mean working on oneself prior to working on others.

U2, one of the biggest rock acts in the world, once wrote a song, that said "*I can't change the world, but I can change the world in me.*" (Repeat) I think that is half right. I think it would be better said "*I can change the world, but firstly I have to change the world in me.*"

Paul, before his great exploits even got written down in the book of Acts, started changing *his* world. The great truths that were later to be written about in his NT letters were formulated and thought about in his own home with his OT open. The strategy of going to different cities and preaching to the Jew first and then the Gentile started because he thought about it first and tested it later. The perseverance, the ability to cope with the constant knock backs, the persecutions, the unjust beatings happened as he felt the barbs of his family, as he endured the angry words of his friends, as he faithfully preached the gospel in his own home town.

For 8 years Paul prepared himself for his destiny, by doing the simple things well. Which when you think about it wasn't that dissimilar to Jesus was it? He knew right from an early age who his Father was and what his task here on earth was to do. But he stayed in the Carpenter's shop, he was faithful in his home town of Nazareth for 30 years, before he spent 3 years in his public ministry.

I was reading a while back a biography of George Whitfield, the great evangelist of the 18th century and it struck me that when he became a Christian he would get up each morning at about 4am and for the next 3 hours he would read the Bible, think about it, make notes and read Matthew's Henry's commentary on the Bible. Later on in his life he would preach sometimes 8 to 10 different sermons a week, but most of his ideas and his talks were formulated many years before as he faithfully read and learned the Scriptures as a young man.

So if we want to change the world, the principle is clear, change your own world first. If you want to do something great for the Lord, don't be in a hurry to get out there and do it. Be well trained first. Be prepared to spend long hours in the presence of the Lord and his word. Realise that the first training ground is often with your own family, in your own home, amongst your own peers, in your own Church.

So don't be afraid to start with the little things and work up. Don't run before you can walk. Spend time working through the key issues of our faith. Be prepared to do the sorts of things that no one ever notices, prayer, support, encouragement, cleaning. Teaching kids the basics, for they will rarely thank you for what you do. Start with the little things. For it is from the little things that big things grow.

So Paul receives his call, he goes to Tarsus and he is forgotten about by most people, but not by a guy called Barnabas. And in Acts 11:25 we read *"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch"*

Barnabas was responsible for looking after the Church in Antioch but it was too much for him and so he went looking for Paul. And so Paul having had his time to prepare himself readily agrees and he comes to Antioch and teaches great numbers of people. Did you notice that he "teaches great numbers of people." He doesn't preach the gospel to the Gentiles, he doesn't evangelise the unconverted, he doesn't argue with Kings, he isn't even a light to the lost! He teaches great numbers of people.

Now Paul could have said to Barnabas, "Look Barney I'm an evangelist. That is what God has in mind for me and this teaching is for someone else with those sorts of spiritual gifts." But he doesn't, does he? He sees the need at Antioch and seeks to meet it. He understands that this is what God wants him to do, now, that God has his whole life under control & that in time, he will get to do the bigger things that have been promised.

So in the early years, we see that Paul starts at home, with his own world. We see that he is willing to use his gifts to meet the needs of God's people. And he does so for a whole year. In fact when we next come across Paul in Acts chapter 13 he is part of the leadership team in that place. And interestingly enough he is named last out of the 5 prophets and teachers.

Turn with me to Acts 13:1...*"In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul"*

In the early years, Paul has a relatively junior position. But he is doing his job faithfully and the Lord is blessing it. And in verse 2 we read *"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus"*

Here is where Paul's missionary work really begins. He has earned his stripes. So now God speaks, and Paul is listening. For if you are going to change the world, you have to listen to the one who has the whole world in his hands. If you are going to change the world, you must realise that it is God Himself who will do it, and our job is to be faithful to his leading, obedient to his calling.

But I want you to notice a couple of things about this first missionary journey. Firstly it was Barnabas and Saul who are called, not Saul and Barnabas. Saul is not the one in charge. Now that would have taken great humility on Saul's behalf. After all he is the one who has been

called to be the light of the Gentile. But as they head off to Cyprus, it's Barnabas who is the one in charge. He is the one who is mentioned first. He is the one who is sent for by the Roman Governor of the island. He is the one who calls the shots. At least at first that is. By the time they leave Cyprus, it is no longer Barnabas and Saul but the book of Acts talks about Saul and his companions.

But the second thing that I want you to see is that when the first missionary journey goes out to the Gentiles it goes first of all to Cyprus. Now Cyprus wasn't Rome, or Paris or the New York of the ancient Rome. It was like Norfolk Island, or maybe Bribie Island, a backwater, with no more than a few thousand people. But it was Barnabas's home island.

Once again they are told to start in their own backyard. Once again Barnabas and Saul are encouraged to be faithful in the little things rather than the big things. And once again they are obedient to their calling. They teach Jesus, they correct wrong thinking, they boldly proclaim the message of Jesus to all people, even the Roman governor - they started making a difference to the lives of the people they came across.

Now we don't hear of massive conversions in this first missionary journey. We don't hear of thousands of people joining the Church. In fact if we see anything at all, it is the picture of opposition. In Acts 13:6 in Cyprus a Jewish sorcerer named Bar-Jesus opposes Barnabas and Paul's message. In 13:49, the Jews lead a riot against Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 14:5 the leaders of the town mistreat them and stone them. So they fled to the neighbouring towns of Lystra and Derbe. Where the leaders stone Paul, drag him out of the city and leave him for dead.

*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. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 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 a baptism of fire for Paul. What we see is many hardships and difficulties. And what we see from these two great men is incredible perseverance. Like a dog with a bone, they would not be shaken off their task. Like men on a mission, they were determined to go and do what God had called them to do, no matter the cost.

Vincent Van Gogh once said "the fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore."

And Martin Luther said "A religion that does nothing, that saves nothing, that gives nothing, that cost nothing, that suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

Friends, being a Christian is dangerous. Changing the world is dangerous, making a difference for Jesus will not be an easy task. But are we going to do it? Are we going to hear the call? Are we going to start, sure with the little things, but with an aim to please our Lord wherever he sends us?

People like Paul say to us, "*follow me as I follow Christ.*" So will we follow? Will we do it together? Will we do what God wants us to do? The long journey starts with a single step.

The path of long term obedience also starts with a single step. So let us take that next step together this evening and see where God will take us!