



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

14 - 19 SEPTEMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

The NT readings for Morning Prayer continue their progress through the Acts of the Apostles; each day's thought is based mainly on the parts of the readings in bold type.

MONDAY - Acts 13:13-43

¹³ Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem; ¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.' ¹⁶ So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak:

'You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen. ¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. ¹⁸ For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ After he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance ²⁰ for about four hundred and fifty years. After that he gave them judges until the time of the prophet Samuel. ²¹ Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. ²² When he had removed him, he made David their king. In his testimony about him he said, "I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes." ²³ **Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised;** ²⁴ **before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.** ²⁵ **And as John was finishing his work, he said, "What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet."**

²⁶ 'My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. ²⁸ Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. ²⁹ When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead: ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people. ³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors ³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."

³⁴ As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, "I will give you the holy promises made to David." ³⁵ Therefore he has also said in another psalm, "You will not let your Holy One experience corruption." ³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died, was laid beside his ancestors, and experienced corruption; ³⁷ but he whom God raised up experienced no corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; ³⁹ by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said does not happen to you: ⁴¹ "Look, you scoffers. Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you."

⁴² As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next sabbath. ⁴³ When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

Thought for the day

This is the first speech of Paul that Luke gives us. In outline, with its summary of Jewish history and its use of OT texts, it's similar to those of Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2) and Stephen before his death (Acts 7). One difference is Paul's reference to John the Baptist in verses 23-25 (quoting Luke 3:16), suggesting that the tradition about John was still well known. John proclaimed the coming of Jesus, Paul and his companions proclaimed the good news of his resurrection (v 34-41).

TUESDAY - Acts 13:44-14:7

⁴⁴ The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. ⁴⁶ **Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."**

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹ Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. ⁵¹ So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

^{14.1} The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them. ⁴ But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. ⁵ And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to maltreat them and to stone them, ⁶ the apostles learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; ⁷ and there they continued proclaiming the good news.

Thought for the day

Jewish opponents had a week to prepare for Paul and Barnabas' second attempt to persuade them of the truth about Jesus (v45). This sets the scene for Paul to turn to his non-Jewish hearers and explain how they would benefit from the reluctance of his fellow Jews to accept the Gospel. The quote from Isaiah 49:6 in v47 is the one used also by Simeon at the presentation of Jesus in the temple by Mary and Jesus (Luke 2:32). But both at Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, the contention stirred up by this approach led to the apostles fleeing for their lives (v50 & v6).

WEDNESDAY - Acts 14:8-28

⁸ In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And the man sprang up and began to walk. ¹¹ When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form.' ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. ¹⁴ When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, ¹⁵ 'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; ¹⁷ yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.' ¹⁸ Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

¹⁹ But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

²¹ After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, **they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. ²² There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we**

must enter the kingdom of God.' ²³ And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶ From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. ²⁷ When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

Thought for the day

The reception at Lystra was initially almost ecstatic - embarrassingly so (v15, 18) - but soon turned nasty when Jewish opponents from elsewhere turned up (v19-20). After such an experience it's surprising that Paul and Barnabas returned, presumably discretely, to the believers in each of the places they had experienced opposition, encouraging them even in persecution (v22). Note also how they introduced some form of structure into the groups of Christians in each town (v23). This desire for orderliness was important for Paul (see 1 Corinthians 14:26-40) and would have contributed to the resilience of the new churches. And so they returned to Syrian Antioch and gave their account.

THURSDAY - Acts 15:1-21

¹ Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ¹⁶ "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, ¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago."

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

Thought for the day

We know from Paul's letters, especially Galatians, how persistent was the view of many Jewish Christians that Gentile converts should accept the Jewish traditions, including circumcision, as a token of their acceptance of the Gospel. The decision of the Jerusalem council described in this passage seems not to have had the desired effect and the disputes appear to have continued until the church became increasingly Gentile-focused. To an extent similar disagreements still arise within the church, with powerful arguments for 'traditional' understandings confronting the demands of new circumstances, for example in relation to sexuality and gender issues. As an institution the church has been remarkably successful over the long-term at adapting to change, in spite of short-term indications to the contrary, and many would see this as a sign of the Holy Spirit at work.

FRIDAY - Acts 15:22-35

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, ²⁵ we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. ³² Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Thought for the day

The disciples in Jerusalem were anxious to ensure that there was no possibility of the church at Antioch or its 'satellite' new churches misunderstanding the official position on traditional Jewish ritual. In case the letter wasn't clear enough they sent their official delegation (Judas and Silas v22) along with Paul and Barnabas to explain its meaning and background. The comparison with today's brief communications with all their potential for misunderstanding and upset is a telling one and speaks to the determination of the church leaders to get it right.

SATURDAY - Acts 15:36-16:5

³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.' ³⁷ **Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.** ³⁸ **But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.** ³⁹ **The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.** ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

^{16.1} Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

Thought for the day

How difficult it is to maintain good relationships, even between people of goodwill within the Christian community. In a short time Barnabas and Paul formed such a strong bond and proclaimed the Gospel together so effectively that today's account of their falling out comes as a shock. What might they have achieved if they had continued together? But Barnabas now disappears from Acts and from the entire NT record at this point and Luke's focus turns almost exclusively towards Paul. Why could such a thing happen then? What responsibility do we have to ensure, as far as it lies within our power to prevent similar things happening now?