

Today's reading Acts 13.13-43
encouragement.

A message of

This section of the Acts begins with the parting of the ways for Paul and John Mark. Mark returns to Jerusalem, whilst Paul goes on to Pisidian Antioch (located in Galatia, at the heart of Asia Minor). There, on the sabbath, Paul and his companions are in the synagogue, perhaps the natural first place to go, and they are invited by the synagogue rulers to give a 'word of encouragement' or a 'word of exhortation'.

The sermon that Paul delivers is reminiscent of Peter's Pentecost sermon and Stephen's speech in Acts 7, but it's different from both. Maybe Luke is using these sermons, given on different occasions, to unfold different stages or aspects of the Christian proclamation.

The story is told of the Hebrew people from the time of the Exodus until David. Then it moves to the explicitly Christian part of the story. The preaching of John the Baptist forms an important step in the story and then the story moves on to Jesus' passion.

What is clear though is that on each occasion the story of Jesus is grounded in the history and experience of the Hebrew people. We are the same. Our story of Jesus is grounded not only in the story of the Hebrew people, but also of the early church and so on, down through the ages. We have a story to tell, and we, like Paul, are part of the story. Our history matters!

So, let's be ready to give a note of encouragement. Let's be ready to speak of the visionary people who founded St. Philip and St. James and Alderley Edge Methodist Church. Let's tell the story of visionaries, who were also prepared to make sacrifices and who were prepared to move on and out from their comfort zones. Let's tell the story of God at work in countless lives in the communities that, in due course, became Alderley Edge as we know it today. God has long been at work in the community and in the churches for many a long year.

So, a word of encouragement, we are people who stand in a long line of visionaries, inspired by the Spirit.

But the story that Paul and the others tell is not **all** as positive as that. It has its negatives too. It speaks of people's ignorance of who Jesus was because they didn't understand him, of Pilate's somewhat shadowy part in the story and of how they took him down from the tree. Is there a silent inference here that they began to give up at that point, believing that this 'greatest story' this hope for the future, had all come to nothing?

The sermon ends, though, on another strong note of encouragement. “I am doing a work, I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.” (13.41b NIV)

Could it be that God is doing a work today, in these strange circumstances, and is inviting us to be both part of the story and tellers of it, in order to give a word of encouragement to others? Could it be that our task is simply, like Peter, Stephen, and Paul, to proclaim the gospel for our day in ways that are heard by those who are not yet church goers? The contact with church and the gospel story during these weeks of lockdown has just been phenomenal. We are in touch with many times more people on line than we are in our church buildings week by week and whilst we yearn to go back to worshipping together, we must not lose some of this ‘new thing’ that God is doing amongst us and the new ways in which we can tell the story of our faith.

“Happy if with my latest breath
I might but grasp his name;
Preach him to all, and cry in death:
‘Behold, behold the Lamb!’

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Rod Hill
Methodist Minister