

**THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER: APRIL 25th 2010**  
**ANZAC DAY**  
**Acts 13:43-52; Mark 16:15-20**

Notes: Acts 13:43-52

- The God-fearers (v.53) were those Gentiles who frequented the Synagogue and tried to live the teachings of the Torah. They were not proselytes. The proselytes were those who had fully converted, had submitted themselves to circumcision and who lived out fully the laws of the Torah. It would appear that the early Church had a great deal of success in drawing these groups into the Church.
- The household is another group mentioned in Acts and they would have included the extended family along with the servants and slaves.
- The members of the Sanhedrin were *filled with jealousy*. In Greek philosophy this was an emotion tied into envy and was generally associated with a desire to kill (Plato, Plutarch).
- Paul and the others are essentially accused of blasphemy because they claim that what they are saying is the word of the Lord.
- They responded “boldly” a response that is expected of the true philosopher. He says that he has to respond in this way because what he is doing and saying is a part of a divine plan in history. It is God’s will and as such is not subject to human limitations.
- Three times in Acts Luke uses the expression *turning to the Gentiles*. Here, in Corinth (18:6) and at the end of the work (28:28).
- What Paul and the others are doing they are doing because *the Lord has so directed us*. That command is found in Acts 1:2,8. This command sends them out beyond Jerusalem (and the Jews) to the ends of the earth (and so the gentiles).

Luke, in Acts, has tried to show that the ministry of Paul follows the same pattern as the ministry of Jesus. There was an initial warm response to his teaching in Nazareth (Lk 4:22). However, as soon as Jesus moved into uttering words that were more provocative and challenging the people changed. This is clear when he speaks about the prophets being rejected and draws a parallel between himself and the prophets Elijah and Elisha (Lk 4:23-27). The people were so angry that they tried to kill him (Lk 4:28-29).

Similarly with Paul. When Paul was preaching in Antioch the Jews and God-fearers asked him to speak again and at the next meeting of the synagogue the place was packed (Acts 13:42-44). However, when the Jews saw this they were enraged, stirred up by the passion of envy and they turned on Paul (Acts 13:44-45). In this way they were simply fulfilling the prophecy of Paul when he told them that they had turned away from what God was doing in their midst. In rejecting him and his message they were rejecting God (Acts 13:41).

So what does Paul do? He decides that he is not going to try and win them over. He turns, instead, to the Gentiles (Acts 14:36). God’s plan to reach his saving love to all peoples, to all nations, to move beyond just the children of Israel was now being played out in the ministry of the Church. The Gentile mission is now the formal

agenda of the Church. Paul is the “light for the nations” and he has been called by God to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Acts 13:47).

But this is not a message that is joyfully accepted by the Jews and so there is a major division. The Gentiles gladly, joyfully and willingly accept this Good News that is preached to them, while the Jews, filled with envy and jealousy reject the message and drive Paul and Barnabas out of the district. In a dramatic gesture that reminds us of a command of Jesus (Luke 10:11) they shake the dust off their sandals and move on. They have more important things to do than to stay and fight with those reluctant to listen to God.

This is a turning point in the story but it does not mean that the message will be joyfully received from here on. Far from it. This is actually the beginning of the story of rejection and throughout the rest of the account set out by Luke in Acts, rejection will remain a constant theme. Proclaiming the Kingdom is a tough task, one that demands faith and a willingness to sacrifice and suffer.

In many ways it is a sad story for we see the rejection of a new opportunity that is being laid out by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. And as we have it from Luke, the reason for this rejection is a very human weakness – envy and jealousy. It is not that the Jews have rejected the preaching on theological grounds. Their problem seems to be that the crowds love Paul, love the message he is delivering and flock to him in large numbers. Their power, their positions, their status and their privileges are all under threat and it would seem that it is this very human condition that is behind their hatred of Paul.

It would have been difficult for that early Jewish community to follow Jesus and after him to become a part of the new faith community that was the Church. They would have had to risk much and they would have found themselves at odds with the Roman Empire for Judaism was one of the tolerated religions of the Empire. They had to give up much and to take massive risks. It would have been much easier to stay where they were.

But at the same time there was something very compelling about the message preached by Paul and Barnabas. The whole idea of having sins forgiven, of having the opportunity of beginning again, of being loved by God, not because of our own ability to obey the law but because his only Son had taken on our humanity and had died on the cross for us. There was something powerfully moving about a community based on the love of God, where everyone was equal, where love was the over riding principle of living and where service of the other guided all that they did. This Kingdom preached by Paul was a Kingdom open to all, where there were no outsiders and was a kingdom that would last beyond the grave.

So the choice was between faith in God and the continuation of life as they had come to know and understand it and the step was one step too far. Many converted and gave their lives to God in Christ. But a significant number, led by the religious leaders, decided to stay where they were. They not only rejected Jesus they decided also to persecute anyone who chose to follow him as the Messiah. In this way, driven by envy and jealousy, they cut themselves off from life.

I guess the question Luke asks us is simple: where do we stand in relation to where the Spirit might be leading us today? Is it stay where we are at all costs or are we open to the possibility of the Spirit at work today as he was in the time of the Acts? Were we prepared for the possibility of an uncomfortable religion?

### Notes on Mark 16:15-20

- Scholars today would generally agree that the Gospel of Mark originally ended at 16:8. The verses 9-20 have been added at a later date. The vocabulary, style and content are not like the rest of the Gospel and most of the earliest versions of the Gospel do not have these additional verses.
- It is safe to presume that it existed originally as an independent tradition that was later added to Mark, presumably because it was thought that the original text ended too abruptly.
- The added verses appear to be a kind of commentary on the meaning of Easter and is made up of traditions that come from the other Gospels and the Acts (all written well after Mark). It probably comes from the second century.
- The commission of verse 15 is found in Matthew 28:19 (cf Mk 13:10; Lk 24:47; Acts 1:8) and stresses the mission to the Gentiles.

One of the great messages regarding the resurrection is found in Mark 16:7 where the angel commands the women to go and tell Peter and the others that the body of the Lord is not to be found in the tomb. They are to go into Galilee for Jesus has already gone there and it is *there that you will see him*. It is a note that is easy to pass on over but it says all that there is to understand about the meaning of the resurrection.

Jesus died and was buried but the grave could not hold him. It is not necessary to go and search for him in the place of the dead. He is risen and is in Galilee. They will encounter him *in Galilee*. In other words, he can be found. He can be engaged once more. Before his death he wandered around Galilee preaching and teaching, healing and driving out demons. He has died but his saving works continue and as we see in the story of the Acts, this ongoing ministry is now to be carried out in and through the faith community of the Church.

What a wonderfully reassuring message that is. Jesus is to be encountered in Galilee. He has not gone from us and ascended to the Father never to be contacted again. He is to be found in Galilee! Alleluia! Alleluia!

It is not seeing the empty tomb that brings about belief, it is the encountering the living Jesus in Galilee – in the place where we live, and work and have our being. Jesus can be encountered. And this is the news we are commanded to preach to peoples everywhere. This is the Good News: God is with us in and through Jesus and he can be met, can be engaged in Christ.

Salvation is the gift that is on offer for those who are prepared to engage the risen Christ in the Galilee of their lives. To meet Christ and to believe in him and accept baptism into him is to be saved. That is the great and wonderful message that we have to bring to the nations. That it is not necessary to live as slaves to the weak and sinful side of our own lives and to the ways of the world. We are set free in Jesus. The joys and blessings of the Kingdom of God are now open to all of us. These blessings are not dependent on what we do or how rich we are, how powerful we are,

how intelligent we are or on anything we think, do and say. These blessings are dependent only on how willing we are to live in Christ. That is what “believe” means. It is not a “head” knowledge but a way of life. If we live the life of the gospel then we will know what it is to live in peace and will experience the joy that God alone can bring.

Mark sets out a list of signs that will accompany those who live this kind of life but it would be foolish to think of these as being literal promises. These are trying to say to us that there is nothing that will overcome us in our efforts to preach the kingdom. Yes, there will be problems, difficulties, threats, challenges and hardships but none of these will prevail against the Gospel faithfully lived. People will step back in amazement and say *Look at those Christians! Is it not amazing how they live. Why can't the whole world be like that?*

Signs and wonders are merely attempts to say that if God is present then something has to happen. The human ways have to change for God is in the room, or in our lives or running things according to his plan. If God is in charge things happen.

It possibly suggests also that perhaps if things are not happening then God is not in charge? Maybe the absence of growth along with the absence of the amazing in the world is a suggestion that there is too much of the human in what we are doing and not enough of the divine. Given the Church for which this document was added to the original gospel, it is more than likely that it is meant to be a wake up call and a challenge.

### **Conclusion:**

Both of these readings would have been challenging to those hearing them for the first time for they both invite us to contemplate whether or not we are truly listening to God. It is all too easy to drift along, comfortable in the belief that we are God's children, brothers and sisters in his Son Jesus. But we are asked today: *what are the signs of this? What are the signs that the power of the Spirit of God is at work in us and in our faith communities?*

But we should not become overly concerned, for they are also readings of great promise. They guarantee that God will be with those who live in his Son, with those who forsake their own ways and sacrifice all to follow him. Yes, there are things to give up, ways to put aside and cherished ways of thinking and believing to be rethought, but the rewards are great: Life in his kingdom.

And, just in case we forget, his vocation is not about what is good for us. We are also reminded that being called by God is about sharing his message with others. We are called and gathered so that we can let others know the Good News that they are saved. Anything less would not be the Gospel and any other way of living apart from living as missionaries would simply not be Church.