**13th August 2017**

**Acts 13.13-52**

I wonder if you are the kind of person who on buying, say a new computer, you open the box, plug it in, switch it on and get going. Or are you the kind of person who before you even take the wrappings off the computer you have read most of the instruction book. They always say – ‘read the instructions before switching the machine on’! I wonder how many of us do that?

I got a new mobile phone a couple of months back and I didn’t have the time to work out all it did, I just switched it on, logged in my details and off I went. It may do what I want it to, phone calls, texts, downloads my emails and tells me if Burnley have sold any more of our star players, but I’m sure it can do an awful lot more. I just need the patience to work through the manual or the set-up instructions. Either that or employ a friendly teenager for a day’s tutorial.

This month and next we are going to look at some of their exploits of the Early Church as recorded in the 13th to the 20th chapters of Acts. We trace the story of those pioneers of the Christian faith and will look at their exploits with a view to how they can inspire us in today’s church. As we look at these stories we will look at what habits or disciplines sustained and nurtured those saints of old. What kept them from giving up. What kept them true to the faith in times of persecution and hardship. What habits nurtured their spiritual lives and gave them an intimacy with God that kept their hearts on fire with love for Him and a devotion and power to be found in the service of Christ Jesus.

Last week I said the root meaning of disciple is ‘one who follows’. We learn a lot from the habits we practice. Last year Andrew Roberts, a Methodist minister in Stafford, published a book called Holy Habits, which is a book about discipleship and the call to adventure. Our Synod is promoting the book for our churches to use. In the book, he explores both the nature and nurture of Christian discipleship. He uses this passage in Acts chapter two as his base foundation for his suggestion that there are ten ‘holy habits’ that are life giving and transforming for personal and community life today. The ten habits are biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, giving, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship and making more disciples. And over these two months as we go through the stories of the early church I will be looking at these habits for ways we can nurture life giving and powerful discipleship today.

Today’s habit is the apostles teaching. Acts 2.42 says the early church devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.

Even the most sceptical of sceptical scholars will admit that some of the writings of the New Testament date back to the first apostles of Jesus: those who knew him and who were witnesses to the resurrection. There are good reasons and historical grounds to believe that most of the New Testament writings are reliable records of eye witness accounts. Luke mentions in Acts the devotion of the early followers of Jesus to the apostles teaching. That teaching would have included biblical teaching drawing on the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, out of which Jesus taught, and Jesus own teaching, much of what is recorded in the New Testament, as well as the stories of his life, death and resurrection. So, in the beginning it was important to learn, listen and engage with the apostles’ teaching to understand who this Jesus is who you are following. Yes, you could just follow him, like unpacking the computer and switching it on straight away, but you would also need the instruction book to inform you how best to follow him and get the most out of being a disciple of Jesus.

People can invent Christianity’s. Sects like the Mormons and the Jehovah Witnesses came about because somebody decided to add to the apostles’ teaching and take Christianity off in a different direction. Some people only get half the message about Christianity: they think it is just about love and good works – and that’s not a bad start! But like getting the computer out of the box and plugging it in straight away without reading the instruction booklet, you can miss out on the details and the enormous capacity and depth you can have.

Love and good works also need direction and insight or else well-intentioned love may be misguided and ineffective love. We know as parents you can pander to your children and indulge them, because you want to be loved and be seen as loving or to have a easy life. But such an approach may well store up problems for later in their lives and in your relationship to them. Love needs discernment and discipline.

There has always been an ongoing debate in the Christian church as to how much we should be guided and restricted by the apostles teaching and the early apostles interpretation of Jesus life and teaching. 500 years ago, on 31st October 1517, those questions came to a head when Martin Luther pinned to the door of Wittenberg Church door his 95 theses– about what he believed was wrong in the practice and teaching of the Church in his day. He believed the church had departed from the teaching of scripture, it had lost sight of the apostolic faith and had added traditions and beliefs that he didn’t believe were biblical and for him therefore not authentically Christian and true to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have been arguing ever since.

In the Reformed Church which grew out of the Reformation we make the Bible our supreme authority for the faith and conduct of God’s people. It is where the conversation starts, seeking to be guided by the life and teachings of our Saviour. But inevitably we will have different understandings of how we interpret those teachings. Nevertheless, we are anchored to them. Once you depart for the apostolic teaching then arguably you are drifting off into something that is no longer authentically Christian and you do that at peril of losing the faith of the apostles.

In the last couple of hundred years with the rise of empirical science there has been much questioning of the miraculous elements within scripture and therefore a discrediting of its authority. ‘How can you believe this stuff?’ is the contemporary response. Hand on heart, I must confess I struggle with some of the accounts in scripture. They may well be tall stories or embellished tales to vividly emphasise a spiritual truth, I don’t know? Yet consistent with all the apostles teaching is the central belief in the resurrection of Jesus. This is what started the Jesus movement. This extraordinary, and on the face of it preposterous, yet life changing miracle, comes up in all the apostles teaching. Take it out and you don’t have authentic Christianity. You just have some morality but not a Saviour, someone who can rescue us from this mess. It’s a mistake I believe that some church’s make in the honest intention of making Christianity more believable by removing the miraculous and the supernatural. But when you do that you don’t have much left that is compelling. Jesus becomes on a par with other great teachers and moral examples but not someone who changes the outcome of life.

If there is a God, if there is a purpose to life, if there is real hope that death and decay is not the last word, then you’d expect God to do something dramatic and out of this world to help us in this world. That’s what the apostles teach.

Picking up on Acts 13 Barnabas and Paul have gone off to Cyprus proclaiming the word of God, having a power encounter with a sorcerer and false prophet called Elymas. They then go on to Pisidian Antioch which is in the middle of modern day Turkey. On the Sabbath, they turn up at the local synagogue and are invited to share a word. Not a man to miss an opportunity Paul takes a few words and gives a sermon outlining the Christian hope.

There a few things to say about Paul’s address and the importance of the apostles teaching for our faith.

First, know your audience. You are more likely to get a hearing if you have things in common with them or you talk their language and relate to them. Paul was a Jew and he went first to his own people and the instant fellowship of Jewish people and therefore the ready acceptance of previously unknown visitors to their public worship. It provided a natural context for Paul to announce the good news as he was committed to doing, to the Jews first. The best people to reach a certain group of people are people like them.

Paul’s approach was tailored to his audience. He tells the story of Israel, bringing out particular points. He highlights how God’s method of operation is to choose his people to prepare them, to lead them through one stage after another and then finally to give them the man after my own heart as king. But then Paul goes on to say that God was establishing a pattern that would result in great David’s greater son. He first of all establishes God’s ongoing work for the redemption of the world, for putting right what has gone wrong with the world. In other words, Paul starts by tapping in to their story and their beliefs and showing how Jesus is the fulfilment of their hopes and their story.

Right from the off Paul refers to Jesus as Saviour or rescuer. He hasn’t said what Israel need rescuing from. Later, he will talk about ‘forgiveness of sins’ but every Jew in the first century knew that all was not well on several levels; that Israel, though God’s people, were not living in freedom, were not being much of a light to the nations, and were often finding it difficult to keep their own law, whether pressure from pagan society or laziness within Jewish community. All was not well: when would God’s purposes finally come true, when would Israel be rescued from their plight? This is the implied question, a corporate as well as an individual problem, to which Paul offers the solution of Jesus the Saviour. It is vital of course that Jesus is descended from David to see this line of God’s plan working out.

The ’forgiveness of sins’ is often today seen as an inconvenient truth of Christianity. We like telling people they are loved and created in the image of God but we don’t like talking about sin and what’s wrong with the world. Yet if you neglect the apostolic teaching on these issues you sell the gospel short and cause problems later down the line. For example, we talked on Tuesday night at the pastoral care Meeting about those who lose their faith. Often, they get angry with God when prayers haven’t been answered or things in their life go wrong. But some of that anger comes from false expectations and a denial that we live in a fallen sinful world.

The teaching of the bible is that the world is in decay to sin and death. The world is not perfect and how God would like it. We are all wearing down and wearing out until we are dust again. Death is not the natural order of things but the effect of turning from God and the curse on all creation. Without this robust doctrine of sin, we will not be wise. We will be constantly shocked by what people (and we) are capable of; by how life swiftly takes away everything we love. We will trust in our own abilities too much and seek satisfaction in things we will inevitably lose. Face sin and death or be out of touch with reality.

That is why the apostles proclaim the good news of Christ’s resurrection because it is a sign that there is something better to come. It is a sign of hope that this world is not all there is and one day the world will be renewed and there will be no more tears, or grief or death.

I saw a post on Facebook the other day that told the story of a woman who had terminal illness who wanted to be buried holding a fork in her hand. Her church minster said that’s a strange request, why do you want to be buried with a fork in your hand. She said that whenever she went to church suppers or socials, when they cleared the tables after the main course if the pudding was substantial and worth looking forward to, something like apple pie and custard, they would always tell you to keep hold of your folk. She said put a fork in my hand because I believe the gospel tells me that there is something better to look forward to.

That was the proclamation of those apostles.

So, Paul ends his sermon by saying that king David died and his body saw decay but the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. ‘*Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.****39****Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*

Jesus has come to put the world to right and if you believe in him you have confidence that there is no condemnation, only forgiveness and love and acceptance.

At the end of the sermon many of those present in the congregation wanted to talk to Paul and Barnabas further. Which illustrates that devoting yourself to the apostles’ teaching can come in different ways. You can have the proclamation and teaching in big assemblies like churches. You can have educated and informed teachers give you Bible classes to help you understand. But some people learn and get to grips better with the bible on their own and in small groups.

There are creative ways of engaging with biblical teaching which take seriously the diverse ways in which adults and children learn. Some of us are visual learners, others primarily auditory, whilst others learn best kinaesthetically. Jesus himself made use of all the senses when teaching. Bereft of PowerPoint he painted vivid pictures to stimulate the visual imagination of those listening. His stories were rich in characters and evocative images. His frequent allusions to nature connected with creation and the senses of sound, touch and taste. We need to find diverse ways of engaging with the bible.

Likewise, in our own personal engagement. In my own following of Jesus, I have used and enjoyed a variety of ways of bible study. There have been many seasons when I’ve been helped by Bible notes. As a church, we commend the IBRA notes and we are linking up with them for our teaching and preaching program at the moment. You get a whole year’s bible notes – so if you want to buy a copy now they are substantially reduced in price being two thirds of the year on.

At other times just simply reading scripture and letting the Spirit speak to us through them. Sometimes that has been augmented by the process of lectio divina – an ancient practice where you read the passage in silence, then read it again noticing any words or phrases that stand out. After a third reading exploring with the Spirit what this word or phrase might mean for you and those you pray for. I have also found bible study groups great for discussion and engagement with a diversity of opinions and fellowship around the word of God. Sometimes using art has been a creative way of reflecting on and entering the message.

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says ‘*What counts in the end is not so much a better understanding or a new idea; what counts for Christian disciples is a community of engagement that takes up the gift of transformation and acts it out in the world in holy living and prophetic witness.*

In the words, practical, biblical living flows out from biblical teaching. It has led to great acts and movement of kingdom transformation, social holiness and justice through such great figures as William Booth, William Wilberforce, Hannah More, Caroline Chisholm, George Muller, Martin Luther king, to name but a few who put word into action.

Among all the holy habits, biblical teaching has a part to play in forming us and guiding us on the adventure of discipleship. It provides the reference points by which we form, evaluate and practice all of the other habits. May biblical teaching draw you to Jesus, the word made flesh and transform you to put word into action.

Bibliography:

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