**20th August 2017**

**Acts 14.8-20**

**A mother has launched an appeal to try to find a generous stranger who bought her stranded daughter an £85 train ticket home.**

India Ballancore, 16, missed her return train to Bristol from Stockport, Greater Manchester, on Sunday.

Her mother Andrea said the stranger stepped in and paid for a new fare after India was told her ticket was not valid for the next service.

A [Facebook appeal](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155633502542612&set=a.10150308774892612.361449.586217611&type=3&theater) to find the woman has been shared more than 120,000 times.

India had been visiting friends in Stockport and had arrived at the station half an hour before it was due to leave.

But her mother said it was her "first big train journey travelling solo" and "for whatever reason she managed to miss it pulling away".

"This has always been a story about human kindness and if nothing else, encourage others to look after one another."

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.

Today’s habits (we are covering two today!) are giving and serving. Acts 2.42 says about the early church that ‘All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need’.

In our passage, today in Acts 14 we have Paul and Barnabas going to Lystra and finding man who was lame and taking pity on him prayed for his healing and the man jumped up and began to walk. Paul and Barnabas responded to the need before their eyes and reacted out of compassion and a desire to meet need. The crowd who see this miracle want to worship Paul and Barnabas as Greek Gods come down to earth. But in the spirit of humility and service both Paul and Barnabas refuse their worship reminding the people that they ae just human like anyone else and called them instead to turn to the living God who provides us all with our needs and fills our hearts with joy. Paul and Barnabas get a reaction from some angry Jews who throw stones at and beat them up and eject them from the city.

Barnabas and Paul if you remember were commissioned by the church at Antioch to go and spread the gospel. Paul was chosen because he could preach and engage in rhetorical debate. Barnabas must have been chosen because he was a man of generosity and compassion.

Barnabas, a native of Cyprus and a Levite, is first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles as a member of the early Christian community in Jerusalem, who sold some land that he owned and gave the proceeds to the community (Acts 4:36-37). When the future [Apostle Paul](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_of_Tarsus) returned to Jerusalem after his conversion, Barnabas introduced him to the apostles (9:27).  His name means ‘Encourager’ and that is what he did. Barnabas is also mentioned in the [First Epistle to the Corinthians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Epistle_to_the_Corinthians), in which it is mentioned that he and Paul funded their missions by working side jobs and (it is implied) went without wives and other benefits other apostles received (1 Cor. 9:6); Paul states that he and Barnabas forsook those benefits "that we may cause no hindrance to the Good News of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:12).

In the book of Acts Luke presents pictures of the early Christian communities of disciples supporting one another and those in need in the wider community by the generous giving of their resources. They shared and sold possessions to create a common fund which could be used to support those in need of income or resources. The fund may also have supported the apostles and later on the deacons and others set apart for ministries of preaching and serving.

John Drane in his Introduction to the New testament suggest that the type of giving described here may not have lasted that long. He speculates that not only did they run out of money but also that they did not dispose of everything at once but sold as the need arose. The first followers did not give all their resources away and live by faith. The evidence suggests they maintained business and other sources of income that sustained the church and their ministry. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with earning a reasonable salary or running a profitable business. They can be valuable sources of regular and sustainable support for Christian mission.

Drane also adds that the early church had a belief in the imminent return of Christ which also affected their attitudes to wealth and property. Why hold on to things when Jesus is coming back and all will be changed. As generations came and went and Jesus had not returned their attitude changed to having to sustain themselves for the long road.

If economics is about ow we choose to sue our limited resources, as followers of Christ we always ned to ask ourselves how our discipleship shapes our economics. The start point for that thinking is of course the nature of God and what we see in the life of Jesus. In Genesis, we see God gifting creation to humanity and making us stewards of all God has given us. It is not long before selfishness (sin0 damages the gift and the relationships that were designed to make life flourish. But his does not stop God giving from the mundane to the miraculous, from the gift of his Son to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we deal with a generous, extravagant even persistent giving of God.

 For many disciples, today the practice of tithes and offerings outlined in scripture continue to inform and guide their giving of resources.

I now of a new church that was started a few years ago and has only thirty members, yet they can support their own minster. Some other local Christians looked on in awe, wonder and envy. ‘how can you do that?’ they asked. ‘because we tithe 10% of our income goes to God’s work’ came the polite but succinct reply.

 At this point it is important to note that whilst the practice of tithing is not rescinded in the New testament it is not specifically endorsed by Jesus, Paul or anyone else. Tithing also was a means to help the poor and destitute in a society that did not make provisions for tis through taxation. Our taxes, we hope, would go some way to do that.

Jesus talks more about money that any other subject but never does so in a legalistic, percentage based, prescriptive way. Rather he used stories and examples to point people to the divine impulse of generous giving. The story of the widow’s mite being the most famous giving an example where those who have the least financially or materially are the most generous with their giving. The story of Zacchaeus who responded to the love of Jesus by giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back anyone he had defrauded is another moving story of the economics of forgiveness.

Giving is a habit best practiced in partnership with other holy habits, in particular with gladness and generosity. We give in response to the generosity of God and giving at its best is about offering the best we can in return. As proverbs reminds us, giving should be a first thought, a first act, not a reluctant afterthought or begrudged gesture.

*Honour the Lord with your wealth,
    with the first fruits of all your crops*; (Prov 3.9)

Someone once explained the difference between an offering and a collection. An offering is what you give to your guests when they come around for a meal. A collection is what you gather up and give to the dog afterwards.

Giving can be done in many ways not juts financial. In societies that are experienced as cash rich but time poor the gift of time has a particular value. There are gift of love that Jesus received that were very simple but very much appreciated: a cu of water to satisfy his thirst, sometimes extravagant gifts such as a pint of pure nard poured over his feet.

Some people give gifts time and love when they serve voluntarily in some community work, or foster and adopt in order to provide a stable home for children, or visits those who ae ill or housebound.

Giving, when practices and lived out is truly transformatory, expressing the very essence of God and making the kingdom real.

Service, likewise follows the example of Jesus, who considered himself a servant, who had come to serve the needs of others. He famously washed the feet of his disciples.

In the early church, the apostles set out to serve the needs of others, as Paul and Barnabas do in healing this lame man in this chapter 14 of Acts. They didn’t just come to serve one another. Their service wasn’t confined to the fellowship of believers. Service spilt out into the streets in acts of kindness and healing. Little wonder then that the church enjoyed

 *the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2.43*

I heard the story of a Methodist Chapel in the Yorkshire village of Howden Clough that had dwindled o fewer than ten members the faithful souls decided they needed to have a chat with the community around them. ‘what do you think of the church?’ they asked. They got a bit despondent when someone said, ‘what has the church ever done for us except ask us for money?’ down but not out they decided to ask a different question.: ‘how could we serve you?’. This was a much more fruitful question and a range of positive replies came in and the members quickly realised there was a big need for a safe place for children to play and for parents to meet.

One of the members, Caroline (the youngest by many years) took the brave pill and suggested transforming the chapel into a play barn that could serve the community every day of the week. Amazingly the members said yes and, to cut a long story very short, that is what they did. Retaining a small area for the traditional worship that the older members still treasure, they converted the rest of the premises into a stunning play centre with a huge soft play area built in the shape of Noah’s Ark, a café and other meeting places. And the church enjoyed the good will of the people. Within three years 42,000 people had been through the doors of this missional centre that had been in danger of closing. And whilst it would be an exaggeration to say the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved, people have come to faith, baptism have become a regular event and regular patterns of prayer and worship have formed in all sorts of creative ways. Looking back over this amazing adventure in discipleship Caroline said:

‘there is purpose for every church o be their faith-sharing community and if we’re not sharing our faith then why are we here? And perhaps our buildings will be the legacy of the lack of faith that some people have in actually stepping forward and looking to where people need the church and not the other way around.

The biggest step in starting anything new is fort to let go – let go of the past and all the things that have happened before and actually look forward to what god wants to do through you. So, my view is you don’t have to be a vicar – you just have to be a Christian that’s willing to follow where Jesus leads.’

The church in Howden Clough reconnected with its community of which it was part. It is easy to become disconnected from the neighbourhoods that we are situated in and the communities that we are called to serve. True service is side by side. It is reciprocal, it is mutual. Angie Shier jones said:

Ministry cannot be done to a community by someone who knows what they need, it can only be done with a community by someone who shares their need.

Ann Morisey makes the point that all forms of service must never be coercive or manipulative. Distinctively Christian? Yes. Loving? Absolutely. But how people respond to the Christ who is at the heart of the service being offered is between Jesus and them.

It is interesting and helpfully reassuring to note how people responded to the service that Jesus offered to them. Some did become committed followers. Some were very grateful whilst others just took what they had received and disappeared. This is beautifully illustrated in the story of Jesus healing ten lepers. Jesus was delighted when one returned to say thank you but rather perplexed when the other nine didn’t. Maybe 10% is all we can expect of people who we help coming back to say thank you. But the motivation to serve shouldn’t be about the praise and thanks we will get. Paul and Barnabas were treated as gods and they were terribly embarrassed and upset at the thought. They wanted God to be praised not them.

Jesus said in the sermon on the mount: *let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.* (Matt 5.16)

The passage in Acts shows the potential misunderstandings that await anyone who tries to speak and act and serve in the name of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There was that TV programme from the seventies: ‘Are you being served?’ John Inman was the camp gent’s outfitter Mr Humphries who was always willing to measure your inside leg and Molly Sugden was the cantankerous Mrs Slocombe from the lady’s department. It was a weekly excuse for trying to get smut and innuendo past the morality campaigner Mary Whitehouse.

But the catch phrase ‘Are you being served’ is a good one for Christians to adopt. Just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve let us too be committed to service, to give and to be generous, as we follow the one who gave his all that we may live.

Bibliography:

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