**When God is central…. May 15 2022. Acts 14:8-23**

I often hear stories of the thriving churches of the 1950’s and 60’s. People openly wonder what has happened to all those young people? Where are they now? Have we deceived ourselves into thinking that because we had lots of children in church each week, that they would automatically embrace the Christian faith? Have we confused Christian value education with Christian faith acquisition?

Pessimism regarding the future for the church, particularly mainline churches in the West, is frequently quite common. We sometimes seem to act as though the church belongs to us, but the church of course belongs to God. The church is a demonstration of God’s activity in our world. The future of the church is not in our hands, but in God’s hands. Of course this does not mean that we sit back and do nothing, far from it. However we do not need to be stressed about the survival of the church. This has always been God’s responsibility. This concept is at the core of this story and this section of the book of Acts.

Paul’s missionary journeys were the enactment of his response to the call of God declared to him through Ananias, “*you will be his witness to all the world “ [[1]](#footnote-1)* This is what God calls us to do also. Its form may take a different shape in our age, but the core of our calling is to share God’s good news with other people. This is a challenging calling. *How do we do this in our age*? We need wisdom and creativity as well as courage. The reality is that this calling cannot be fulfilled through our efforts. This is a work of God in which we are called and privileged to share. The church can easily drift into relying on the natural abilities or the acquired skills of its members, and pull back from the challenges to be a part of work which exceeds our capacities and clearly compels us to rely on God.

The story we read reminds us that the mission of the church was not going to be accomplished by human effort, it was as it still is, the work of God in which we are privileged to share.

As it is the work of God we are called to keep coming back to ensure that God is being kept central in what we are doing and saying. We are called to orientate ourselves around God.

When God is central we can see God at work

When God is central we can see the ways in which God is active in our communities. As Paul affirmed the centrality of God in all he was doing, so he was able to perceive occasions where God was particularly working and to join in this work, doing his part. In the story before us Paul had been declaring the good news about Jesus to the people of Lystra. In the midst of his proclamation, he notices something about one of the listeners, a lame man. He saw some evidence that God was working in this man’s life, as he listened. Paul looked at him intently and discerned that the man was open to the healing power of God. So Paul boldly told him to stand up, which he did, in fact he sprang up and walked around. This was clearly an amazing, miraculous occurrence therefore precipitating some very dramatic responses from the crowd.

Later when Paul was speaking to the people he states that even when people have been unresponsive to God, God is still active and even the natural world points to the activity of God. *“In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; 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.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Even when we move away from God, God’s loving heart still faithfully and graciously reaches out to us and blesses us not just with the necessities of life but also with joy. God can use an amazing variety of ways to capture our attention. The power, beauty, love and care of God can be communicated to us even by encounters with the natural world. God is always active and the natural world also points to that reality. The sense of order in our natural world reminds us of the faithfulness of God.

As we live out our faith in a community which is often less obviously interested in God, we have the opportunity to work with God. To allow God to show us what God is doing around us and the ways in which we are being called to join in the work of God. When God is central in our thinking we are far more likely to see what God is doing around us. It opens our eyes to new insights and possibilities.

When God is central other things are cast in a different light

Paul realises through personal experience that the path of following Jesus will involve personal suffering, in his case, as for many others, physical persecutions will be a characteristic of this suffering. In our culture it may have more to do with strange looks from other people, some exclusion from events that Christians may be perceived to be ‘uncomfortable’ in, some tense conversations, some judgemental or incorrect assumptions being made regarding our views or various other manifestations.

Paul and his companions were undeterred by being rejected, misunderstood or experiencing persecution, they ready and even keen to return to conflict zones. It was more important to build up, strengthen and encourage the new community than to preserve their personal safety. These believers also needed to know that it was realistic to expect that persecution would be part of their journey too. When God is central to their understandings of life, persecution and rejection are cast in a different light and they are able to entrust one another to God’s care in all situations. When God is central perseverance, courage and hope can thrive.

When God is central we can identify errors

When God is central there is a prompt recognition of things which do not reflect the activity of God and a willingness to speak out against erroneous understandings. Lystra had a temple to Zeus and when they observed the healing of the lame man, their cultural understandings caused them to assume that Paul and Barnabus must have been gods in human form.[[3]](#footnote-3) Paul and Barnabus immediately identified that the adulation of the people was a form of blasphemy, as they deified Paul and Barnabus, and so they spoke out against this error. Jewish people were expected to tear their robes when they heard blasphemy, it was also a response of repentance and mourning. Paul was clearly deeply concerned about the response of the people. Straight away he tried to reorientate their focus back on God, pointing out that they were merely humans like their listeners and pointing to the nature of God.

 When God is central the church can work together as a team.

From the outset of his ministry in Lystra, Paul seeks to connect effectively with the community, connecting his message with their existing understandings and warmly addressing them as friends. We see Paul and Barnabus engaging in prayer and fasting with these believers as they seek to understand God’s guidance together in appointing leaders for the new Christian community.

Paul likewise was the recipient of the early Christian communities working together as they gathered around him to support, advise and provide for him when his life was endangered. These same communities prayed for him, commended him and his ministry to God and commissioned him and Barnabus in their ongoing ministry.

When God is central…

Keeping God central within our lives and our churches is foundational within Scripture.

Though I am certainly not a sailor I do understand that knowing where “true north” is, becomes vital in recognising where you are, where you can and can’t go and how to get to where you are going. It is the key orienting point. When Paul and his companions remained orientated around making sure that God was their *“true north”,* they were able to cope with apparent set backs, persecutions and great success without becoming overwhelmed or arrogant. They maintained “an even keel”.

Around what do we orientate our lives? Family? Work? God?

How do we deal with opposition, failure, misunderstandings?

We often speak these days about seeing where God is at work and joining in. What might we do to get better at seeing where God is at work?

1. Acts 14:7 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acts 14:16-17 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary,*2nd Ed.(Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press,2014) 363 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)