

Sermon 22 May 2022.

Acts 16: 9-15

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5.

John 14:23-29.

Psalm 67

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Are we there yet?

Many people travelling with small children will have heard this question, often repeatedly. Over the past two years the government and epidemiologists have also heard versions of this question from business people and the general population.

In the church as well, there is this question but possibly a little less frequently. In the creed we say that Jesus “will come again to judge the living and the dead.” The early church was expecting his return soon: Maybe a few weeks or months and then it became years. Now 2000 years later we don’t ask it quite as often, although at the time of the millennium, it was more frequent.

But today, we see the church having less influence, numbers dropping and criticism growing, with commissions of enquiry into church-based institutions that have been places of abuse over many years. Instead of respect for the church, much of the media reports are of what has gone wrong with the church and little of what we do right. Many in our society have never set foot in a church to attend a service and have no idea of what we believe. Our mission to spread the good news seems to have failed for many people.

Having had to shut down services and go online for much of the past two years has not helped. Here in St Hilda’s, we have the uncertainty of Andrea and Lance leaving and the changes that will occur here.

How do we get back to the halcyon days of the church that many of us can remember from our earlier days when there were full services and over-flowing Sunday Schools, and it was normal to attend church on Sunday mornings? Surely the early church was one of continued growth.

Acts shows us that it didn’t always run smoothly.

Barnabas had earlier been sent by the church in Jerusalem to see what was happening in Antioch in Syria as they had heard that people were being told the good news there.

People had dispersed from Jerusalem after Stephen was martyred and as they fled to new places, they spread the good news. Antioch is the place where people are first called Christians (11:26). Barnabas finds Saul in Tarsus and brings him to Antioch to participate in the work of continuing to spread the good news. While they are there, Barnabas and Paul, are sent off by the church, following the instructions of the Holy Spirit as recorded in chapter 13. "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

So, they had set off on what was to be Paul's first missionary journey and with them was a young man, John Mark. You will note the change of name from Saul, the Hebrew version of his name to Paul, the Roman version. This occurs in Acts 13:9 and may reflect Paul's mission to the gentiles.

In Acts 13:13, John Mark leaves them and returns to Jerusalem. At the end of chapter 15, Paul suggests returning to the places they had visited to see how they were going. Barnabas wants to include John Mark again and Paul and Barnabas have a major disagreement about this, as Paul feels that John Mark deserted them. They split up, Barnabas taking John Mark and leaving for Cyprus while Paul takes Silas and goes through Syria and Cilicia, with Timothy joining them in Derbe.

This becomes Paul's second missionary journey. They keep travelling through Phrygia and Galatia (these are all Roman provinces) but are having difficulties. They are prevented from preaching in the province of Asia (modern-day western Turkey) by the Holy Spirit. So, they kept on going until Paul has a vision in the night of a man in Macedonia begging him to come and help.

So, they go to Macedonia. They are leaving Asia, the eastern part of the world where the gospel was first preached and going to Europe, the west. Lydia is the first European convert that we hear of. Also, there is another change in the language. Previously the author (thought to be Luke) uses the 3rd person but now he uses the first person. It appears that Luke has joined the expedition.

Here, in Philippi, there is a small group of women worshippers, but it appears that there are not enough Jews to form a synagogue, and, on the Sabbath, they meet at the river. Lydia is a wealthy businesswoman. Purple dye comes from the murex shellfish and is very expensive and so only the wealthiest people can afford to have clothes dyed with it. The colour is that of power and prestige. If you want to know the colour, look at that of a bishop's shirt (nowadays produced synthetically – no shellfish are harmed in its production).

Lydia is not a Jew. She believes in God (like Cornelius in chapter 10) and follows the moral teaching of the scriptures.

She is converted to the Christianity and offers the hospitality of her house. Paul and his companions now have a stable place to work from.

Acts continues with the story of the spread of the good news and the opposition to it.

So how did Paul and the others cope when they had challenges? The church was very young, and the disciples have had to go from being led by Jesus and his making the decisions to doing it for themselves, whatever 'it' was.

They started in Jerusalem. Peter and the other disciples met for the daily prayers at the Temple and taught and preached there, getting criticism and being jailed for doing so. The church begins to grow as part of Judaism.

The martyrdom of Stephen unleashes persecution of the very young church and scatters the believers. Saul is one of the keenest persecutors. Then, on the road to Damascus he meets with God, and, with the help of a very brave Ananias, he is baptized, and Barnabas later involves Saul/Paul to minister in one of the places these believers have scattered to.

Paul emerges as the great apostle to the gentiles and Acts tells of his journeys to new places and back to see how those he has ministered to previously are getting on. Much of the rest of the New Testament is formed by his letters to these new churches.

Challenges come from the clash of customs with gentile and Jews meeting together, particularly around food, and gradually the church becomes separate from Judaism. Over the centuries the church has grown to be us in the 21st century.

Today is the last Sunday of the Easter season. Next Sunday is Ascension (Ascension Day is on Thursday but next Sunday is the closest Sunday) and the following Sunday is Pentecost which can be regarded as the birthday of the church when the Spirit falls on the followers and Peter stands up in Acts 2 and preaches his first sermon.

How did they get from there to here?

Their life was built around prayer and gathering to worship together. Paul always has travelling companions. Even when he is in jail, there are people around him. He isn't alone.

In the gospel for today, Jesus assures us that we will not be alone, even though he will not be physically present. He is sending the Holy Spirit. Paul sees visions that guide him to Macedonia. Barnabas and Paul are sent from Antioch because as they were praying the Holy Spirit sends a message. Throughout, the Holy Spirit is present and, if we listen, he will guide us, sometimes in directions that we do not expect.

They have a goal, an expectation. This is not the end, all that there is. Jesus promised us that he will return, that there is a future that we can't see yet, life beyond this life.

The reading from the Revelation is the vision of the New Jerusalem, reborn, coming down from heaven with God living here with us, in no way distant.

God's presence provides the light, there is no darkness. All the nations and rulers of the earth walk by its light. Nothing impure can enter. The river of the water of life flows through the middle from the throne of God and the trees lining it are all available for eating and the leaves for healing.

We have returned to the beginning, to Genesis, but a new Genesis. It is a vision of the new Garden of Eden, one river from the throne, not four as in the original and every tree, even the tree of life, allowed to be eaten.

Our life as Christians is not one that is set in stone. It is ever changing and growing, as we as individuals grow and as the church grows and changes.

We can learn from past experiences, both our own and others, but we mustn't try to hold on to the past. It is past. We must look to the future, waiting and praying, listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us and like Paul moving on.

In the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa put it this way: we live "from beginnings to beginnings through beginnings that never end."

If you feel that you haven't got there yet, that things are ever changing, it may well be that you are travelling on the path the Holy Spirit has put in front of you.

Keep praying and listening, keep friends with you on the journey and travel "from beginnings to beginnings through beginnings that never end."

Amen.