



Partnership in the Gospel

Acts 13:16-47

The Revd Gervais Angel, Director of Studies at Trinity

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The senior curate at the parish at which I first worked was a first-class preacher. When I joined him as the junior curate in 1961 he and I often used to chat after the midweek evening prayer about the ministry. One remark of his which arose in a conversation about preaching was this, 'Preaching is a very *personal* thing'. Later I came across a similar point in P. T. Forsyth, the powerful Congregationalist pastor and theologian at the turn of this century. Forsyth described preaching as 'truth through personality'. On the one hand, truth is supra-personal, something which it is open to the public to discover, not the preserve of one individual. Christian preaching is bearing witness to that truth, the truth as it is in Jesus. And yet preaching is not simply witness to the truth outside ourselves. Preaching is witness to a truth which we have discovered, and so its presentation is bound up with our integrity; it is at best intensely personal. David Watson so often disarmed his audience by sharing aspects of his personality which the rest of us would be too embarrassed to make public. 'Preaching is a very personal thing'.

A common-core kerygma

Yet there is a basic, objective message which the biblical preachers preach. Paul shared with Peter the truth as it is in Jesus, and Luke shared with Theophilus the common features of their preaching or, if you wish, common features of the early Christian preachers in general. Paul's speech at Pisidian Antioch echoes Peter's speech at Pentecost, chez Cornelius and elsewhere. Here are some of those features in the book of Acts: the crucifixion at the hand of the public who rejected Christ, and the central place of the resurrection in the saving work of God (Pentecost 2:24; speech at the stoa of Solomon, 3:15; Peter's speech before the rulers of the people and elders, 4:10; Peter and the apostles addressing the sanhedrin, 5:30; and chez Cornelius, 10:39-40); the forgiveness of sins (2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 10:43); the offer of salvation (2:21, 4:12, 5:31); the use of particular scriptures (Joel 2:28-32, 2:17; Psalms 16:8-11, 2:25 and 13:35; Psalms 2:1-2, 4:25-26, and Psalms 2:7, 13:33; Psalm 110:1, 2:34; Exodus 3:16, 3:13; Deuteronomy 18:15-16, 3:22). Such parallels and others in the speeches attributed to both Peter and Paul are evidence cited in favour of the theory that these Acts speeches are evidence of stock, stereotype sermons used by early Christians. Although Paul in Romans 15 calls the Gospel '*my Gospel*', and although he is at pains to argue

in Galatians that his Gospel is by revelation of Jesus Christ, not 'according to man' (Gal 1: 11-12) nor from man, he still made enquiries of Peter on his first visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18) and set before the apostles at Jerusalem his Gospel, to which they responded by giving him the right hand of fellowship (on the second visit Gal. 2:8). Peter and Paul were partners in the Gospel: they were *under* the Gospel, not over it, and the common features are evidence of partnership, a common stock of truth to which they were committed.

Situation-Sensitive

However, at the same time, no speech in Acts is totally like another. Already we have seen this to be true of Peter's two speeches at Pentecost and chez Cornelius. The prophecy of Joel 'in the last days I will pour out my Spirit . . .' (2:17) at Pentecost, the Hellenistic 'lord of all' Christology and narrative about the wonder-working of Jesus (reminiscent of the Hellenistic Apollonius of Tyana) at Cornelius' house and the 'lost ending' created by the interruption of the Holy Spirit in the latter speech (10:36, 38, 44) – these are *distinctive* features, variant angles geared by the same preacher to divergent congregations. And this time at Pisidian Antioch, the speech is ultra-sensitive to the context, to the synagogue.

This is *pastoral* preaching. For preachers' research into the context is never without profit. Cyril Tucker, an Oxford don in the 1960s, said that reading the newspapers was the basis of his prayers. The same principle holds for sermons, too. We are where the news, especially the local news, is. Peter's *kerygma* took on board the descent of the Spirit; Peter's instruction of Cornelius recognised the Hellenistic deities whose titles belonged to Jesus alone. Like Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar at Tel Aviv, in Mesopotamia (Ezek. 3:15), he 'sat where they sat' (AV).

The Synagogue Sermon

Antioch was the Corbridge of South Galatia. Just as the Romans built at Corbridge, near Hexham in Northumberland, a large garrison to fight off the Picts, so at Antioch they built a Roman colony to ward off the highlanders in South Galatia. Here the Jews were, like Ezekiel and his audience, in a strange land. The local colour inside the synagogue is fascinating. First, although the practice in Rabbinic synagogues was for the preacher to sit, Philo the

Egyptian says that important seekers stood in the synagogue, and this Paul does. Second, the service pattern in Acts 13 is again typical of a synagogue: readings from the law, according to J. W. Bowker, Deuteronomy 4 (cf. Deut. 4: 34, 37 with Acts 13:17) and the Prophets probably 2:6-16 (cf. II Samuel 7:12 with Acts 13:23) were tied together with an introductory text, I Samuel 13:14, by the person invited to speak a word of *paraclesis*, of exhortation, or, as we would say, 'ministry to the church members'. Notice that this was no evangelistic speech to the outsider. It ends with a warning to the Jewish saints at Antioch using the scripture in Habbakuk 1:5 not to make the same mistake as the Jerusalem people and their leaders who fulfilled the scriptures by killing the son of David. 'They fulfilled the scriptures', he seems to say, 'but don't you do the same thing, fulfilling the scriptures in the wrong way'. Third, M Dumais, in 1976, made the point that the synagogue exposition tended to apply the scriptures to contemporary events. This Peter did at Pentecost, using Joel 2 to illuminate the descent of the Holy Spirit. This the Dead Sea Scrolls writers did, finding the 'ratz', the secret meaning of the scripture, in their experience or their expectations. Paul has something to declare about the present and he shows how this event is illuminated by scripture. His theme is: 'Look at what God has done!'. Once a young clergyman, set up by the soft-sell approach to the sick, began his small-talk with a man on traction. The response he received from the patient in pain was this: 'Young man, talk to me about God or get out'. 'Talk about God' – that's exactly what Paul does with his kinsmen, the Jews and God-fearers at Antioch towards Pisidia.

Good News to the People

His good news was fulfilment. God is working out his purposes – God called the patriarchs, God multiplied the population in Egypt and mightily led them out, God put up with them (literal meaning in v. 18) in the wilderness, God destroyed seven nations; this whole process, including Egypt, took 450 years. He gave them judges and after Samuel he met their request for a king (Saul), who reigned for 40 years (as Eli judged) and changed him for David. David was after God's own heart, (I Sam. 13:14), and he promised David seed, (II Sam. 7:12). Paul weaves these two texts together. Notice that Paul gives as a quotation: 'I have found David, the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will carry out all my wishes'. As far as we can detect, this saying combines part of Psalm 89:20 (Masoretic text), part of I Samuel 13:14, and, according to Professor Max Wilcox, a possible translation of 'after my own heart' found in a Targum on Samuel. This is Paul's climax: God fulfilled his promise to David when he brought Jesus as Saviour. Paul establishes Jesus as the one whom all Jewry sought, the son of David, Saviour, as the judges and kings had done of old.

Now he introduces the Gospel which he shared with Peter, but he sticks to the story-form, the narrative presentation, as Peter had done with Cornelius and company. This story-form was a typical Jewish way of teaching, called *haggadah*. So we have an explanation of scripture (or *midrash*) in story-form (*haggadah*). If Luke composed this speech from scratch, he was a brilliant historian, ultra-sensitive to context. If Paul actually spoke it, he knew his audience well. It is certainly not a stock speech, universally applicable in the church. And Paul recounts Jesus' story – John the Baptist's humble witness, God sending out the message of salvation, the Jerusalemites and their leaders fulfilling scripture by killing Jesus in ignorance and asking Pilate to destroy him, his being taken down and put in a tomb, God raising him from the dead, his appearance alive to his followers from Galilee to Jerusalem who witnessed to the people. And this is presented to the Antiochian Jews as 'All good news to you. Here is your Son of David'.

Son of David

Verses 32-36 spell out the Son of David fulfilment theme. Paul uses the same text, Psalm 16:10 and develops the same argument as Peter did in the Pentecost sermon (2:25-28). There he showed that the words in Psalm 16, 'You will not give your holy one to see corruption' could not be fulfilled in David since he died and his tomb was in Jerusalem. Triumphantly, Paul cries out, v. 37, 'But the person God raised did not see corruption', for Jews reckoned no corruption set in for three days after death. Equally triumphantly Paul applies to Jesus the Kingdom psalm, Psalm 2, as the author of Hebrews does, v. 7, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you'. We can hear the OT bells ringing in Paul's ears, we can hear him saying to himself: 'Here's the real king, he is God's own son'. No wonder he tells his fellow Jews that he has good news for them. But the end is not yet – better is to come.

Forgiveness of Sins

Forgiveness of sins, a theme so common in Peter's preaching, is the climax of Paul here. But he applies it in a way which brings us into the heart of the letter to the Romans. He says: 'because through this man forgiveness of sins is being declared to you, from all the things for which you could not be justified in the law of Moses, everyone who believes in this man is justified', (paraphrase of 38-39). Sceptical scholars reckon that Luke has peppered a typical Petrine speech with a Pauline idea at this point. But does not Paul himself at Romans 4:6-8 translate justification into Old Testament language with the Psalm 32 quotation: 'Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven'? No, here at Acts 13:38-39 the partnership in the Gospel between Peter and Paul is beautifully portrayed, for forgiveness and justification go together. But the language is not all – what of the mean-

ing? Time and time again the Lord can minister to our feelings of inadequacy and failure with the same message: stop looking at yourself and look at what I have done for you and what is already yours in me. To quote the hymn: 'My sins, not the part but the whole, are nailed to the cross and I bear them no more, praise the Lord, it is well with my soul'.

The Change in Mission Policy

The end of this visit to Antioch towards Pisidia is an eye-opener. Why do you think that Paul, who even in a later writing like Romans, taught that the Gospel was for the Jew first and also for the Greek, turns in v. 46 to the Gentiles? Did he say anything out of place about *God*? Was his theology unacceptable? No, for although he closed his sermon with a warning not to be like the cynics in Habbakuk who refused God's new work, they still wanted him to return and speak on the following Sabbath. They wanted to hear more good news despite his implied

criticism. But the news was too good socially. It brought too much power with the people. Many Jews and God-fearers did more than simply listen; they turned and received the grace of God. And when the following Sabbath came, people turned out in droves. This was far too much for the hard core; they were jealous. They contradicted what Paul had to say. Paul interpreted their contradiction as rejection of Jesus and then made his dramatic volte-face at Antioch: 'Look, we are fulfilling the Scriptural commandment to be God's servant (Isaiah 49:6), look, we are turning to the Gentiles.' (46-47).

When you and I are fully surrendered to the Gospel, and when our actions are so centred on Christ that traditionalists feel threatened by the impact of our example and influence on others, do not be surprised, but commit your way to his way, as shown in his Word, who taking the form of a servant became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Letter

Sir, To say that the Prime Minister's speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the various reactions to it have made interesting reading is to put it mildly. David Alton is right to inveigh against a consumerism that measures a man's life by his standard of living; Donald Shell, while reminding us of how it was before the Thatcher era, also made the welcome point (and developed it on the way) that 'Political heresy . . . arises when one truth is magnified at the expense of equally vital complementary truths'. Iain McGregor made two monumental blunders in his contribution. First, in claiming as he does that 'So long as our politics presumes money has a place in theology, whatever Christian claims are made about politics constitute a nonsense', he seems to be misquoting Paul and saying that money is the root of all evil! After all, what is money? It is only a means of exchange that enables trade and business to be carried on; the alternative to a money economy is a barter one. If in ancient times they did it by weighing out so many pieces of gold or silver, the principle was just the same. In the second place, he doesn't spell out for the benefit of the politically and economically unlearned what Social Credit is and what it entails. In any case, assuming that a government ever came into power with anything so radical in its manifesto, the first problem on its hands would be that of foreign economic relations – in other words, convincing other countries that we were safe to trade with. The reaction of Jean-Marc Berthoud was in some respects more interesting, if only for the lurid picture he gives of his own country and his indictment of both the current Welfare State and prevailing constitutional theory. Without a doubt, any form of

government, when divorced in practice from any overriding considerations of ultimate moral right and wrong, cannot avoid becoming utterly corrupt.

The ancient Hebrew economy contained several features that commend it for further consideration. In the first place, there was no centralised government; if it had any real centre it was the tabernacle in Shiloh, where they were reminded of their common religious and national roots. The second factor was the Hebrew land law; here, the most significant feature was the way that owners of land retained title to the freehold even when they fell on hard times and needed to 'sell' the land they owned to tide them over a rainy day. This 'sale' was nothing more than at most a long-term lease, price changeable depending on how many years remained till the jubilee year. An heiress in her own right to any landed property had to choose her husband from her own tribe. This would have made it difficult for any monopolisation of the land by the rich and powerful. The references are: Leviticus chapter 25; Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12; Deuteronomy 15:1-11. Very significantly, the last reference ends by pointing out that there would always be someone, somewhere, and at some time, who might be dependent on the generosity of the better-off. Even with a system of divine devising, some would fall on hard times in this fallen world.

Naturally, the adoption of such a system would require a revolution of Copernican proportions in national thinking. It would also need refining to take account of our more complex society. Nevertheless, it is still worth looking at.

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