

Acts 17:1-14
An unequal and opposite over-reaction

Question for you: what do you do when a large number of people come to faith? One answer would be: prepare for the baptisms. Another one would be: prepare for the backlash.

I don't dare say that on every occasion, if the Gospel is clearly proclaimed, there will be a backlash. You don't see this at the beginning of Acts, for example, on the Day of Pentecost:

So those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

(Acts 2:41)

And Luke then goes on to record what happened in that new community that grew up:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

(Acts 2:46-47)

But you could probably argue that that is not typical. What we saw last week, in the first of this set of **Virtual Visits** we're currently doing to this eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea ... that was more like it. We might think of those places like **Ephesus** and **Philippi** and **Athens** as wonderful places to visit on a holiday. Only, as we all realise, holiday travel has been **somewhat disrupted** this year as a result of Coronavirus, so we're just visiting some of those wonderful holiday destinations this year by remote means, seeing them safely on the screen, reading about stuff that happened there centuries back.

So last week we visited **Philippi**, right up at the top of the Aegean Sea. Paul had thought it would be a good idea to re-visit some of the places he had previously gone with the Gospel, but he was soon re-directed to new areas. There's a strange vision calling him across the sea **to the area of Macedonia**, and Philippi. And we'll go on from there in a moment. But I want first to give you a flavour of that earlier set of visits he had made, to let you see the pattern that was developing.

The first cities were in what we would now call Eastern Turkey. Here's Antioch, the first one of all that we read about in any detail.

And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."

(Acts 13:14-15)

Invited to preach, look! So of course Paul does, a sermon which picks up on Jewish history and shows Jesus as the fulfilment of it:

“Of [David’s] offspring God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised.”

(Acts 13:23)

And look, people hear this and respond. They want this Jesus!

“And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, ...”

(Acts 13:32-33)

The message which I think it’s safe to say would have been the same in every place they go to - if people are prepared to listen to it through. Unless they prefer to remain enslaved ...

“Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

(Acts 13:38-39)

So here’s the response:

And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

(Acts 13:43)

And it looks as if things are going to carry on and grow, too:

The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

(Acts 13:44)

Only there has to be a *but*.

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.

(Acts 13:45)

And it seems we are introduced to a pattern here.

And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.

(Acts 13:49-50)

The Gospel spreads. But it causes changes in people's lives, of course. And those changes affect other people, who might view them as threatening or disturbing, something that they either reason or just react *must* be pushed back against.

Here in Antioch, it was the Jews who felt threatened. Paul preaching Jesus as the fulfilment of Judaism, the Messiah - and therefore taking away the following of the religion's traditionalist leaders. Yes, too right, they're going to push back. And not just in Antioch, either. The pattern develops. Next stop, Iconium:

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

(Acts 14:1-2)

Next, there's success for the Gospel, down the road at Lystra ... but ...

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

(Acts 14:19)

Soon after there's a bit of a break, back in the **other Antioch in Syria**. And time at Jerusalem, discussing a more reasoned objection from some traditionalists trying to subject the new churches:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

(Acts 15:1-2)

So then, after quite some time, this "second missionary journey" starts off, as we mentioned last week. But has all this controversy died down? Are they going to find synagogues more accepting now of this new spin on the old teaching, now they've had a chance to think it through a bit more? Actually, not a bit of it. They are going to be hounded from city to city by people objecting to this novelty.

We're not told much about the places that were re-visited, but when we get onto that new ground in Philippi - the stuff we looked at last night, we should expect things to be different. How come? Remember the introduction to the account.

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

(Acts 16:13)

Why “a place of prayer”, instead of a synagogue? It looks as if the Jewish presence in this town is so negligible that there isn’t even a synagogue. If there were more than a dozen Jewish men, they could constitute a synagogue, but there *isn’t*. And it seems a reasonable inference to me that that means there was very little organised Judaism in Philippi in those times.

And yet, there was still trouble, when the Gospel started taking root. Only this time, it wasn’t *Jewish* interests being challenged, but straightforward financial interests. Paul casts that “spirit of divination” out of the slave girl ...

... a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.

(Acts 16:16)

Well, when *that* happens, you can probably predict the response:

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.

(Acts 16:19)

So this is a backlash on *financial* rather than theological grounds. But Paul and his team move on from Philippi.

So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

(Acts 16:40)

And when they move on, the more normal pattern seems to kick in right away.

After a very long introduction, here’s the summary of today’s passage: **The Jews in Thessalonica react very badly to the declaration of the Gospel.**

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

(Acts 17:1)

What should you expect from that? I’d said, from what we have read earlier in Acts, that Paul is going to try to share the Gospel in the synagogue. And, sooner or later, there will be a backlash against the message and the messenger. Which, as we read earlier, is precisely what did happen.

Proclamation
Backlash
Pursuit

- **Episode 1: proclamation**

So there's a synagogue, and an evangelist in a new town. Notice the "as was his custom":

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ...

(Acts 17:2)

Folks, what do you have in the way of good *customs*, good habits, routine ways of doing things that you have considered and decided to adopt into your lives as default options?

I'm not just thinking in terms of evangelism, but that's not a bad place to start. Do we make an effort to engage with people, or do we just prefer to withdraw, and keep ourselves to ourselves? We've had a **new neighbour** recently. It could have been easy enough to just let him get on with occupying his new home. Actually, he came knocking on *our* door in order to introduce himself. But, if he hadn't, would we have taken the initiative?

But how are you ever likely to share the Gospel with someone, if you've never shared anything else with them? Never spent time talking with them, never even noticed who lives where around you. If you don't know what makes *them* tick - and you don't show any interest in it - how will they ever discover what makes *you* tick - or *Who*, I should say, makes you tick?

Have you got *customs* about what to do if someone comes to you with a **moan about someone else**? Are you always going to believe that kind of salacious tale, or do you choose to stand back and refuse to get drawn into another round of character assassination?

When you hear a **news story** ... or an **advert** ... or read an **internet article** ... is your *custom* to assume it must all be true? Do you turn off your critical faculties because it's the **BBC** - or your **favourite Christian activist site**? Don't they all have some kind of agenda of their own, and therefore their own slant on things?

I could go on with all sorts here, but I should really just get on with the story of Thessalonica here. We've worked out already that it's not just a carbon copy of Philippi. It's further west, the next major town along the **Via Egnatia**, the major east-west trade route that runs at that point along the northern coast of the **Aegean sea**, and at an intersection with another major road running more north-south. It's also a port city, so it's another important trading location.

But while Philippi was an official Roman colony, Thessalonica had asked Rome, back in 168BC, to take over the city and grant them protection from their enemies. Which Rome did, but they continued to allow considerable freedom in running their own affairs. So Thessalonica is not going to be so heavily weighted

towards Roman culture as Philippi - and perhaps that's why there is a synagogue here but not in Philippi.

There's not so much of ancient Thessalonica to show you as with some of those other places, though, because the location has grown and grown over the centuries, into what is now "Thessaloniki", with a million or so inhabitants. But when they were re-locating a bus station in 1962, though, and digging down, they found **these remains** underground.

And there's something very neat that has been discovered among the bits of Thessalonica that have been excavated: a single word, the same that we've got in this passage today, on an inscription.

... they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, ...

(Acts 17:6)

Prior to that discovery, some Bible critics had said that Luke - the writer not just of his account of Jesus' life, but also this book we call Acts - took quite some liberties with the facts. And the word which he uses here, which we could convert into an English word "**politarch**" - featuring the Greek words for "city" and "rule" - hence its translation - was just made up, invented by Luke. But that is the precise word that has been found on an inscription unearthed at Thessalonica, showing that Luke actually knew his stuff very well, and was paying very precise attention to detail as he wrote. Which is what he said, at the beginning of the two-volume work, you might also remember:

... it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

(Luke 1:3-4)

So, back to the account of Acts 17. Paul "preaching the Gospel", we might say. But Luke uses some very precise words to describe what he is doing here.

... he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

(Acts 17:2-3)

Getting the precise meanings into English isn't going to be simple, but doesn't the fact that Luke uses three different words show that Paul is taking different tacks in trying to communicate here? It isn't just dumping a load of information in his preferred format, take it or leave it.

So that "reasoned" word is the root of our English word "dialogue"; it's not just one-way giving information, but two-way interactive discussion.

“Explaining” is more literally “thoroughly opening”; making sure people see the implications and the finer details of what is being said. Walking them through what this and that means. What we should do by way of response, if we are coming to believe that this is true.

“Proving”, literally “placing alongside”, but often meaning “set before” someone - like serving a meal, ready and hopefully delicious to eat, because it’s attractively prepared.

So although there’s another word towards the end of v3, which carries a clear note of authority to it, **proclaim** - or “preach” - it really doesn’t mean that “preaching” is just about standing here like I’m doing and just spouting stuff. It means that there is a whole breadth of ways in which it should be done. If people don’t get it immediately, then it takes time and patience to explain it in other ways and other words that someone can more easily understand. It means listening to the people you’re speaking to, so that you can *dialogue* with them.

Because there is a life-changing message that people need to hear. It’s not about being nice people, so that God will hopefully be nice to you. It’s not about keeping all the right rules, so that God will have to be nice to you. It’s about how God has already shown his love for people like us, people who are suffering from such a dire spiritual disease that it takes such a remedy as *this* to cure us: ***it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead***

Folks, do you actually believe that? That it was *necessary* for that to happen. That your sins and my sins are of sufficient magnitude as to make that *needful*. That there was no other possible way that our salvation could be achieved. And that there is nothing further that is now needed for it to be achieved. That we have nothing about ourselves to boast about in relation to our believing. It is *all* down to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Ah yes - for the Jewish audience particularly, a piece to the puzzle that they would be particularly sensitive to: ***“This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”***

And it works, too. Here’s how Luke describes the outcome:

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

(Acts 17:4)

So that’s some *official* Jews, if I can put it that way, plus a much larger proportion of those fringe adherents of the synagogue - mostly persuaded, but not enough to subject themselves to the official initiation rite to full Judaism. But people whose eyes have been opened fairly recently, I would imagine - and therefore more ready to have them more fully opened to far clearer light again.

- **Episode 2: backlash**

But even as we say this, it becomes all the more obvious to me that a backlash is inevitable. Those people that the Jewish hardliners have been working on for years suddenly up and off and follow Paul and Silas. This is bound to follow:

But the Jews were jealous, ...

(Acts 17:5)

And they didn't stop at just *feeling* jealous. They whip up a mob.

... and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

(Acts 17:5)

Typical mob: ill-informed, and if they don't get what they want, it turns ugly.

And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

(Acts 17:6-7)

But isn't that a strangely wonderful accusation there, at least in parts. I mean, "**another king, Jesus**". Isn't that exactly right! Wasn't that precisely the message from Jerusalem, several decades earlier?

"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"

(Matthew 2:2)

And confirmed from Jesus' own lips, too:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."

(John 18:36)

So yes, another king - but far *better* than Caesar, if that claim is true. A king who can conquer *without* armies - even if he can call upon the armies of heaven.

And that thing about "**turning the world upside down**". Isn't that quite a back-handed compliment! Yes, following Jesus *does* make a difference. And if it makes a difference in enough individual lives, it will make a difference on a societal level too. To those just looking in, it will seem like things are turned upside down. Really, though, it's starting the process of turning things the right way up.

And here, of course, it's an exaggeration born of the exasperation the spokesmen of this mob are feeling, but it's got to imply that these Christians are involved in something very notable, and not in just a few pokey little villages, either.

But *also* "of course", there is going to be misrepresentation, too, and here's a very common one: "**acting against the decrees of Caesar**". Isn't that the kind of thing we hear levelled against believers in Jesus in all sorts of repressive regimes? Acting against ill-defined interests of the State - and therefore can be arrested and locked away without trial.

Folks, *expect* to be misrepresented by people who simply do not understand what following Jesus is all about - or people who are actively reacting against it. *Expect* to be quoted out of context, no matter how carefully you word what you say. Expect even the Bible to be quoted at you, just a bit twisted, by people who are trying to score points and belittle you.

I can remember back in my college days, the college debating society, and a debate that had some kind of provocative religious title. And one of the guys, trying to show how mean and vicious a tyrant God is, quoted from the Bible like this:

God, desiring to show his wrath ...

(Romans 9:22)

I have done a bit of deliberate mis-quoting there myself, to match what this guy did. He made it seem as if he had started at the beginning of the sentence ... which it *isn't*. On-screen, it should be shown with ... - there are words missed out. Words missed out which show the quote in a different light

What if God, desiring to show his wrath ... ?

(Romans 9:22)

So, folks, expect at times to suffer libel or slander or unsubstantiated allegations, if you stand for Christ. It is par for the course. It rankles to not be allowed to retaliate, but that would be to fight *unholy* fire with *unholy* fire. And we have a different example to follow:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

(1 Peter 2:23)

Anyway, here's the magistrates' response to it all. Rather dodging the issue, I think, looking for a quiet solution, as far as possible. Just keeping an uneasy peace.

And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

(Acts 17:8-9)

And the believers think it would also be a good idea to cool things down.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea,
(Acts 17:10)

But then, having incensed the Thessalonian Jews sufficiently, there is ...

- **Episode 3: pursuit**

... and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.
(Acts 17:10)

So for Paul and Silas, it's business as usual. A new town, and Paul acting once again "as was his custom". And at first it looks as if things are going swimmingly.

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

(Acts 17:11-12)

But news travels ... and travels backwards.

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

(Acts 17:13)

I just want to flag up a different ending to this section, compared with last week's. Last time, in Philippi, we saw Paul standing on his rights as a Roman citizen, insisting on fair treatment.

But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out."

(Acts 16:37)

Here, it is very different.

Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there.

(Acts 17:14)

He might have been able to fight his corner, using his Roman citizen's rights again. But he accepted an alternative. Which, if you think about it, might have been a very clever move. He moves along, taking the gaze of these agitators with him.

But he leaves Silas and Timothy, good Gospel men, able to continue the work quietly in his absence.

Folks, some of us would be timid, and just cut and run immediately, at the first sign of trouble. I can remember someone back in Harlow trying, for the first time, a bit of door-to-door evangelism. When they suffered the first impolite word, they resolved never to risk that situation again. We need to be a bit tougher than that.

But some of us are also just a bit too ready for a fight. We want to make points, and stand on principle ... we say. And yes, there *are* times for that. But there are also times when it is wise to choose which fights we engage in. Or, as the phrase sometimes is ... *is this a hill to die on?* Is it *that* important. Because ... not *everything* can be that important.

Paul might have toughed it out in Berea, pursued by these Jews from Thessalonica. But he chose to move on. There are still new pastures ahead, new places where, back in the middle of the first century AD, the Gospel had not yet been heard. Fresh people to tell the old, old story, of Jesus and his love.

A new visit for him, in person. Athens. Currently besieged, I saw on the news yesterday with **wildfires**. Better that we make it another **virtual visit** ... next week.