

**THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH:  
THE WONDERS OF GOD'S GRACE**

**ACTS 11:19 - 15:35**

**<sup>19</sup>Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews.**

**<sup>20</sup>But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists [or 'Greeks'] also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.**

**<sup>21</sup>The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.**

**<sup>22</sup>News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.**

**<sup>23</sup>When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; <sup>24</sup>for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.**

We have been observing Philip, one of the seven, and then Peter, the leader of the apostles, as they leave Jerusalem to witness to Jesus in Samaria, in Judea and in the port city of Caesarea. Luke now takes us back to those who fled Jerusalem because of the persecution which flared up after the martyrdom of Stephen (see 8:1-4). Scattered (Greek: *diaspeirō*) because of the persecution, they are witnesses of Jesus to their Jewish brothers and sisters in the *diaspora*. Phoenicia, Cyprus (see 4:36) and Cyrene (in Libya; see Luke 23:26) are mentioned. In Antioch they begin preaching to Gentiles. We have witnessed the welcoming of the Gentile Cornelius by the Jerusalem community (see 11:18). Now comes a flood of Greek-speaking Gentiles who 'turn to the Lord'. Some manuscripts have *Hellēnistas* (Greek-speakers, 'Hellenists') and some have *Hellēnas* (Greeks).

Antioch was established on the Orontes river c.300BC as the residence of the Seleucid kings. In 64BC it became the capital of the Roman Province of Syria. The Greek geographer Strabo estimates that the population of Antioch in the first century was about half a million, which would make it the third largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. The Jewish community was a significant one, possibly numbering as many as twenty-five thousand. It had its own governor who was assisted by elders.

When the Jerusalem community heard of the rush of Gentile converts, they sent Barnabas to investigate. He was introduced to us as being a Levite and a native of Cyprus (see 4:36). The apostles gave him the name Barnabas because of the gracious way in which he encouraged others and brought them consolation and comfort. It was he who introduced Saul to the apostles and reassured them by telling them of Saul's ministry in Damascus (see 9:27-28). Barnabas recognises that what is happening in Antioch is a sign of 'the grace of God' (compare 4:33), and he is filled with joy (compare 8:8). He is 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith'. We recall the description of Stephen at the beginning of his ministry (6:5), and Luke's statement that Jesus was 'full of the Holy Spirit' (Luke 4:1) as he set out on his ministry.

Barnabas seeks out Saul in his home city of Tarsus, where he had been sent by the Jerusalem community who were afraid that the trouble which his presence in Jerusalem was stirring up would see a repeat of what happened to Stephen (see 9:30). Luke's statement that Barnabas and Saul met with the church in Antioch 'for an entire year' which is followed by their visit to Jerusalem points to this being the year 46AD. Paul has already been a Christian for twelve years – the three seemingly unsuccessful years in Arabia followed by another nine years in Cilicia about which we have no information.

To this point the members of the community have been called 'brothers and sisters' – of Jesus (see 1:14), and so of each other (see 11:12). They have been called 'believers' – in the crucified and risen Messiah (see 1:15; 5:14; 9:30; 10:23; 11:1,21). They have been called 'saints' (see 9:13,32,41) – because they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The most common title (thirty-seven times in Luke's gospel and twenty-eight times in Acts) has been 'disciples' – because they look to Jesus as their teacher.

Now, for the first time, they are called 'Christians', not by the Jews who would not have recognised their claim to be followers of the Messiah, but by the Gentile population. The fact that they met on the first day of the week and that Jews and Gentiles met and ate together set them apart as not being a Jewish sect.

**<sup>25</sup>Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup>and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.**

**So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'**

**<sup>27</sup>At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.**

**<sup>28</sup>One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius.**

**<sup>29</sup>The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea;**

**<sup>30</sup>this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.**

Once again Luke wishes to highlight the connection between Antioch and Jerusalem (see 11:22). In the spirit of sharing which is central to being Christian (see 2:45), Antioch helps the Jerusalem community in its time of need. By noting the presence of prophets, Luke highlights the fact that the initiative for this sharing comes from the Holy Spirit. The Western text introduces this scene with the statement 'When *we* gathered together'. This supports the tradition that Luke was a Syrian and a member of the Antioch community.

There is evidence of recurring famines during the reign of Claudius, including an especially widespread famine in 45-46AD. In his letter to the Galatians, after speaking about a visit which he made to Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18; see Acts 9:26), Paul goes on to insist that he went to Jerusalem only on one other occasion 'in fourteen years' (Galatians 2:1-10). It is likely that he is measuring from the time of his conversion (34AD) to the year of his writing (perhaps late 48AD). There are good reasons for arguing that the visit mentioned here by Luke is the visit described by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10, and that it took place in 46AD.

A problem could arise from the fact that Luke speaks of this visit before describing the death of Herod Agrippa, which we know took place in 44AD. However, Luke may do this to reinforce the link between Jerusalem and Antioch before shifting focus.

It is interesting to note that the relief was sent, not to the apostles, but to the elders ('presbyters'). Till now Luke has used the word 'elders' only of the elders who were part of the organisational leadership of the Jewish community (see 4:5,8,23; 5:21; 6:12). The Christian community in Jerusalem organised itself, as one would expect, in the manner to which the members had been accustomed as Jews. For Paul's continued care for the poor in Jerusalem see especially Romans 15:25-27.

Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great. He was also descended from the Maccabees through his grandmother, Mariamne, who was the grand-daughter of the last of the Hasmonean dynasty, Hyrcanus II. Herod Agrippa's father, Aristobulus, and Herod Antipas of the Gospel narrative were brothers. Having assassinated Aristobulus, Herod Antipas married Herodias, his murdered brother's daughter and the sister of Herod Agrippa. When Caligula became emperor in 37AD, he gave Herod Agrippa the territory of his uncle Philip (mentioned in Luke 3:1). Later he added Galilee. In 41AD, the emperor Claudius added Samaria and Judea, so that in 41AD Herod Agrippa was king over most of the territory once ruled by his grandfather. One can imagine the Messianic expectations which this aroused (see 12:11).

Throughout this scene, Peter is portrayed as reliving the experiences of Jesus. Hands are laid on Jesus' disciples as they had been laid on Jesus (see Luke 9:4; 20:19). Peter is arrested, as was Jesus (see Luke 22:54), and on the occasion of the same festival (see Luke 22:1,7,54). They intend to bring Peter out to the people, as they had brought Jesus to Pilate (see Luke 23:1,26).

Luke's interest is in demonstrating that the power of the risen Christ welcomed through prayer is greater than the power of a tyrant. Peter is told to rise up from the tomb of the prison, as Jesus rose from death. He is told to dress, as were the Hebrews, ready for a journey to freedom (see Exodus 12:11). When the twelve were miraculously freed from prison on an earlier occasion, they were instructed to go to the temple (see 5:18-21). Not so Peter here. He is outside, walking along a lane. His mission from the risen Lord will take him out of Jerusalem to walk to lanes and by-ways of the world.

<sup>1</sup>About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. <sup>3</sup>After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) <sup>4</sup>When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.

<sup>5</sup>While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. <sup>6</sup>The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.

<sup>7</sup>Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his wrists.

<sup>8</sup>The angel said to him, 'Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.' He did so. Then he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.'

<sup>9</sup>Peter went out and followed him; he did not realise that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup>After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him.

**<sup>11</sup>Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'**

**<sup>12</sup>As soon as he realised this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying.**

**<sup>13</sup>When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup>On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. <sup>15</sup>They said to her, 'You are out of your mind!' But she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel.'**

**<sup>16</sup>Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed.**

**<sup>17</sup>He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.**

**And he added, 'Tell this to James and to the believers.'**

**Then he left and went to another place.**

Peter is being released, not just from prison, but from Jerusalem, and from the prison of his Jewish Messianic expectations based on Jerusalem, 'from all that the Jewish people were expecting'.

The community is gathered in prayer in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. They are remembering the Exodus and remembering also the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The parallels with the life of Jesus continue. When the news of Peter's 'resurrection' are brought to the disciples by a woman, they say that she is out of her mind (compare Luke 24:11). They are amazed to see Peter, as were the disciples on seeing Jesus (see Luke 24:41). They think that perhaps he is an 'angel'. They thought Jesus was a 'ghost' (Luke 24:37).

Peter explains the way God released him, and instructs them to 'tell this to James and to the believers'. This is the first indication of the organisational leadership exercised by James in the Jerusalem church (see commentary on 1:14; see also 15:13; 21:18). James is mentioned also by Flavius Josephus, who refers to him as 'James, the brother of Jesus who is called Christ' (*Antiquities* 20.9.1).

Peter leaves Jerusalem and returns to Caesarea (see 12:19). It was at Caesarea that he came to realise in prayer that discipleship of Jesus could go beyond the confines of Judaism. Now he has been released to leave Jerusalem and the expectations he shared with his Jewish brothers and sisters. His reception of Cornelius preceded the narrative of the Gentile converts in Antioch. His leaving Jerusalem is soon to be followed by the missionary outreach from Antioch.

Luke speaks of him again at the Assembly in Jerusalem (see 15:7), after which he disappears from the *Acts*. Before this we know from Paul that he visited Antioch (see Galatians 2:11) and it is possible that he also spent some time in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 1:12). Paul speaks of him travelling with his wife (1 Corinthians 9:5), and he was martyred in Rome.

Peter returns to Caesarea, where he had met and baptised Cornelius (see Acts 10:24). He stays in the port which connects Palestine to the vast Roman empire, ready to witness to Jesus ‘to the ends of the earth’(1:8).

Flavius Josephus gives us an account of the sudden and unexpected death of Herod Agrippa. It took place at Caesarea, during the games which were inaugurated by his grandfather, Herod the Great, to honour Caesar Augustus.

Luke sees in his death an act of God. The one who once again ruled over the kingdom of David, the one people looked to as a Messiah, the one who was honoured as a god, is struck down, as were the Egyptians (see Exodus 12:23). The description of his death echoes the description of the death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (see 2Maccabees 9:7-9).

Comparing this scene with the previous one, we can sing with Mary: ‘He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly’(Luke 1:52).

Mortal, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord God: Because your heart is proud and you have said, “I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,” yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with the mind of a god.

– Ezekiel 28:2

But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was stripped from him.

– Daniel 5:20

After alluding to the fall of the tyrant, Jesus praises his Father for the way the ‘little ones’ welcome his word (see Luke 10:17-22). After the fall of Herod Agrippa, Luke speaks of the advance of the word and turns our attention back to Barnabas and Saul who, after completing their mission to Jerusalem (see 11:29-30), return to Antioch. They bring with them John Mark (see 12:12).

**<sup>18</sup>When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.**

**<sup>19</sup>When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death.**

**Then Peter went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.**

**<sup>20</sup>Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they came to him in a body; and after winning over Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they asked for a reconciliation, because their country depended on the king’s country for food.**

**<sup>21</sup>On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. <sup>22</sup>The people kept shouting, ‘The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!’**

**<sup>23</sup>And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.**

**<sup>24</sup>But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. <sup>25</sup>Then after completing their mission to Jerusalem Barnabas and Saul returned [to Jerusalem] and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark.**

**<sup>1</sup>Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler [‘tetrarch’ – Herod Antipas], and Saul.**

**<sup>2</sup>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.’**

**<sup>3</sup>Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.**

**<sup>4</sup>So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia;**

**and from there they sailed to Cyprus.**

**<sup>5</sup>When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.**

**And they had John also to assist them.**

In his speech to the people after the healing of the lame man at the temple gate, Peter identified Jesus as the prophet promised by Moses (3:22-23). Stephen made the same point in his speech (7:37). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as a prophet (Luke 4:24; 13:33). In Acts we have already heard of prophets coming down from Jerusalem to Antioch (11:27). Through the Holy Spirit, prophets share in the gift which Jesus had in its fullness: the gift of being able to discern and communicate God’s will. Luke has portrayed Peter as a prophet. Likewise Stephen. He now wants to show Paul carrying on this ministry.

Thirteen times in Luke’s gospel Jesus is addressed as ‘Teacher’, a title which he uses also of himself (see Luke 6:40; 22:11). A teacher is recognised as giving authoritative understanding of God’s revealed word. Peter has been exercising this ministry in Jerusalem, and Luke has already presented Paul as doing the same in Antioch (see 11:26).

While the church is ‘worshipping the Lord’ (Greek; leitourgeō, from which our word ‘liturgy’ derives) and fasting, the Holy Spirit reveals that Barnabas and Saul are to be set aside for the work ‘to which I have called them’. We recall the words of the risen Jesus to Ananias concerning Saul:

He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

– Acts 9:15

It is God’s work to which the two missionaries are called, and so the community lays hands upon them as an indication of solidarity and as a prayer that the blessing of God will go with them.

In the chronology which we are following, we are in the year 47AD. They travel the twenty-five kilometres to Seleucia and cross to Cyprus (see 11:19), the birthplace of Barnabas (4:36). There they begin proclaiming the gospel in the Jewish synagogues of the capital, Salamis. They are accompanied by John Mark, whom Barnabas and Saul had brought back with them from Jerusalem (see 12:25).



Though Barnabas is mentioned first, the focus is on Saul. There are parallels here with the encounter between Peter and Simon, the Samaritan magician (see 8:20-23), and also between Peter and Cornelius, the Roman centurion (see 10:44-48; 11:18).

Here we have one of many examples of Luke's accuracy as an historian. Cyprus became a Senatorial province in 22AD. As such it was governed, like Corinth (see 18:12) and Ephesus (see 19:38) by a proconsul. We have confirmatory evidence that the proconsul resided at Paphos, and though the name of the governor at this time is not known, there is evidence of the existence of the name Sergius Paulus.

Luke takes the occasion to tell us that Saul was 'also known as Paul'. It is not immediately obvious in English that 'Paulus' and 'Paul' both translate the one Greek word *Paulos*, a well documented Roman family name (*cognomen*), and the name by which Paul introduces himself in all his letters. A person was customarily addressed by his family name in the Roman world. Up to this point Luke has been calling him by his Jewish name 'Saul'. From now on he will invariably refer to him as Paul. Is it a mere coincidence that he has the same name as the proconsul, or did Saul take the name Paul at this point, as a way of acknowledging the patronage which the proconsul gave him?

It is important to note that the harsh words spoken to the Jewish magician (also called Elymas, which is a Greek rendition of a Semitic word for magician), are in view of bringing about the man's conversion. His name 'Bar-jesus' means 'son of the Saviour', but he is behaving as a 'son of the devil'. Paul knows what it is like to experience one's blindness (see 9:8). For him it was the first step to conversion. Bar-jesus, too, 'will be blind *for a while*' – a necessary step if he is to come to the true light. He is 'looking for someone to lead him by the hand', as Paul himself was led (see 9:8). Hopefully he found a hand which led him to 'righteousness' and 'the straight paths of the Lord'; and hopefully he accepted the grace offered him.

**6When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-jesus.**

**7He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God.**

**8But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith.**

**9But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him <sup>10</sup>and said, 'You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? <sup>11</sup>And now listen — the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.' Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand.**

**12When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.**

Map 3 : Missionary Journey of Paul and Barnabas



Luke speaks of ‘Paul and his companions’, for his focus is now principally on Paul. Coastal boats normally stopped at Attalia (see 14:25). Coming as they now are from the island of Cyprus they disembark at the river port of Perga. Perga is in the Roman province of Licia-Pamphylia, set up by Claudius in 43AD. It boasted a temple to Artemis and a theatre that could hold twelve thousand. At this stage, for reasons not given by Luke, John Mark leaves and returns to his home in Jerusalem (see 12:12; see also 15:38).

Paul and Barnabas head for Antioch, possibly encouraged by Sergius Paulus (see 13:7) who came from there. The one hundred sixty kilometres journey from Perga to Antioch is over difficult and dangerous terrain. Antioch was the southern capital of the Roman province of Galatia. Though in eastern Phrygia (western Phrygia had been incorporated into the province of Asia), Antioch was sometimes called Pisidian Antioch as it guarded the Pisidian frontier. Like Antioch in Syria, it was named after Antiochus I, king of Syria, son of Seleucus I, a general in the army of Alexander the Great. It was twelve hundred metres above sea level and was a caravan stop on the west-east road from Ephesus to Tarsus. Dominated by an acropolis, it had a temple to Caesar Augustus. Paul mentions his stay there in his Second Letter to Timothy 3:11.

The missionaries go to the Jews, as they had in Cyprus (see 13:6). Paul has been commissioned by the Holy Spirit (13:1-3), as was Jesus (see Luke 3:21-22). Like Jesus (see Luke 4:1-13), he has confronted demonic powers (13:4-12). Now, like Jesus (see Luke 4:14-21), he enters the synagogue. He addresses the Israelites and also those Gentiles present who, like Cornelius in Caesarea (see 10:2), are attached to Judaism but have not been circumcised.

He begins with the creed: how God chose their ancestors, and how God ‘made great’ (Greek: *hupsoō*) the people while they were in Egypt. We will see that the theme of exaltation is central to his homily. He goes on to speak of the Exodus and of God’s patience with the people in the wilderness.

**<sup>13</sup>Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia.**

**John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem;**

**<sup>14</sup>but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia.**

**And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.**

**<sup>15</sup>After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation [*‘encouragement’*] for the people, give it.’**

**<sup>16</sup>So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: ‘You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen.**

**<sup>17</sup>The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. <sup>18</sup>For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.**

**<sup>19</sup>After he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance <sup>20</sup>for about four hundred fifty years. After that he gave them judges until the time of the prophet Samuel.**

**<sup>21</sup>Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years.**

**<sup>22</sup>When he had removed him, he made David their king.**

**In his testimony about him he said, 'I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.'**

**<sup>23</sup>Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised;**

**<sup>24</sup>before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.**

**<sup>25</sup>And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.'**

Through the power of God they received the Promised Land as their inheritance. The theme of inheritance is also central to Paul's homily. He refers briefly to the judges given them by God. It is unclear where Luke found the figure 'four hundred fifty years' to cover the period during which Israel held the Promised Land as an inheritance. Is he drawing on 1Kings 6:1 which estimates 'four hundred eighty years' from the conquest to the building of the temple (two hundred eighty would be more accurate)? Or is he estimating the period from Joshua to the destruction of Jerusalem (in fact from about 1220 to 587)?

The initiative for a king came, not from God, but from their ancestors. However, God gave them Saul; but then God removed him, and gave them David. Paul is preparing them for another divine initiative when God gives them Jesus. Paul then turns to the promise given by God to David through the prophet Nathan: the promise to 'raise up' a son:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will *raise up* your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom ... I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

– 2Samuel 7:12,14

Paul includes a reference also to Psalm 89:

I have *exalted* one chosen from the people. I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; I my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him.

– Psalm 89:19-21

He alludes also to the First Book of Samuel:

The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart.

– 1Samuel 13:14

Paul moves immediately from the promise made to their ancestors to the fulfilment of that promise in the person of Jesus, given to Israel as a 'Saviour' (see 5:31; and Luke 1:69; 2:11). He quotes the last of the prophets, John the Baptist (see 1:5,22; 10:37; 11:16; also Luke 3:3,16).

Having recalled the wonderful things that God has done for their ancestors, Paul now speaks of the wonderful way in which God has brought these deeds to their culmination and fulfilled his promises 'for us, their children, by raising Jesus'. He addresses the 'Israelites' as 'descendants of Abraham's family', opening the minds of his audience to think of the promise made to Abraham that 'all the nations of the earth' would be blessed through him (see Genesis 22:18). They invited Paul to share with them 'any word of encouragement' (13:15). He is offering them 'the message of salvation'.

Paul tells the story of the failure of 'the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders' to recognise their Saviour or to understand the prophecies. They had Jesus killed. The word 'tree' is a reference to the curse of Deuteronomy 21:23; see Galatians 3:13). 'God raised him from the dead', thus fulfilling, 'for us, their children', 'what he promised to our ancestors'. Paul quotes from Psalm 2:7 (see 4:23-31). With the fall of the kingdom, the prophet of the exile reinterpreted the Davidic promises as being meant, not for the kings, but for the people themselves (see Isaiah 55:3). Paul's interpretation is along the same lines. The promises were fulfilled in Jesus, and, through Jesus, the promise of being 'raised up' is offered to everyone. This was Peter's message also (see 5:31; 10:43).

Paul refers to those who are witnesses of the risen Jesus (see 1:8; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39,41 and Luke 23:55; 24:48), and, like Peter in his Pentecost speech (2:27), he quotes from Psalm 16:10. The promise contained here was obviously not intended for David himself, for he experienced corruption. It was intended for David's son, Jesus, the promised Messiah.

**<sup>26</sup>My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. <sup>27</sup>Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. <sup>28</sup>Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. <sup>29</sup>When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.**

**<sup>30</sup>But God raised him from the dead; <sup>31</sup>and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people. <sup>32</sup>And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors <sup>33</sup>he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'**

**<sup>34</sup>As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, 'I will give you the holy promises made to David.' <sup>35</sup>Therefore he has also said in another psalm, 'You will not let your Holy One experience corruption.' <sup>36</sup>For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died, was laid beside his ancestors, and experienced corruption; <sup>37</sup>but he whom God raised up experienced no corruption.**

<sup>38</sup>Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you;

<sup>39</sup>by this Jesus everyone who believes is *justified* [NRSV 'set free'] from all [those sins] from which you could not be *justified* [NRSV 'freed'] by the law of Moses.

<sup>40</sup>Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said does not happen to you:

<sup>41</sup>'Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you' [Habakkuk 1:5].

<sup>42</sup>As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next Sabbath.

<sup>43</sup>When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

The solemn beginning of verse thirty-eight mirrors the opening of a similarly important statement by Peter to the Sanhedrin:

Let it be known to all of you ... There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

– Acts 4:10,12

Thanks to Jesus, '*everyone* who believes' is 'justified' from sin. Whether we be Jew or non-Jew, Jesus draws us into a love-relationship with God where we are no longer hindered from doing the will of God: 'In God's beloved Son we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (Colossians 1:14); 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace' (Ephesians 1:7). This is something which the Law of Moses was unable to do.

Furthermore, Jesus frees us from anything that hinders our loving obedience to and communion with God. Luke has captured the essence of one of Paul's most profound convictions: 'a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ' (Galatians 2:16); 'a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law' (Romans 3:28).

Paul goes on to remind the Jews and non-Jews in the synagogue of Antioch of a warning given by the prophet Habakkuk 1: 5 – a warning, which is followed by words full of hope: 'the righteous live by their faith' (Habakkuk 2:4; see Galatians 3:11; Romans 1:17). Faith is the 'work' that God is doing in Paul's missionary proclamation.

Paul's speech in the synagogue of Antioch has echoes of his opening words to the Romans, in which he introduces himself as:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Romans 1:1-4

The jealousy aroused within the Jewish community by the success of the missionaries reminds us of the jealousy of the Sanhedrin (see 5:17). The response by Paul and Barnabas is in no sense a rejection of Judaism. To the very end (see Acts 28:17-23) Paul continues to proclaim the good news ‘first’ (see 3:26) to the Jews. In Rome, too, some respond favourably, while others ‘refuse to believe’ (28:24), and Paul issues a warning (28:25-27) and announces that ‘the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen’ (28:28).

In what happens here in Antioch and later in Rome, Paul is following in the footsteps of Jesus. In Luke’s account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:22-30), acceptance gives way to rejection. There, too, Jesus recounts God’s giving of grace to Gentiles, and there, too, he finds himself the object of their persecution.

Far from rejecting Judaism, Paul is reminding his Jewish brothers and sisters of the mission given to them by God. He quotes Isaiah 49:6 in which God calls on the people to be God’s obedient servant and to ‘bring salvation to the ends of the earth’ (compare 1:8). As a Jew, Paul is determined to be faithful to the mission given to his people by God, no matter how many of his fellow Jews fail to believe (see 3:16), and so ‘reject God’s purpose’ (Luke 7:30) and refuse the burden of being the faithful and suffering servants of the Lord. We recall the words of Tobit:

A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth; many nations will come to you from far away, the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to your holy name, bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven.

– Tobit 13:11

In God’s providential design, ‘the word of God’ came first to the Jews (compare 3:26), that they, in turn, might take it to the world. Following Jesus’ instruction (see Luke 9:5; 10:11), the missionaries demonstrate that in rejecting the word of life (see 11:18), people are placing themselves outside the realm of the holy.

**<sup>44</sup>The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.**

**<sup>45</sup>But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul.**

**<sup>46</sup>Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup>For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”**

**<sup>48</sup>When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers.**

**<sup>49</sup>Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region.**

**<sup>50</sup>But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. <sup>51</sup>So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. <sup>52</sup>And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.**

**<sup>1</sup>The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers.**

**<sup>2</sup>But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.**

**<sup>3</sup>So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them.**

**<sup>4</sup>But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.**

**<sup>5</sup>And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them,**

**<sup>6</sup>the apostles learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country;  
<sup>7</sup>and there they continued proclaiming the good news.**

In his last letter, written to his close friend Timothy, Paul remembers his experiences at this time:

You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

<sup>2</sup>Timothy 3:10-11

Iconium, one hundred twenty five kilometres to the southeast of Antioch, was also in eastern Phrygia, and in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia. Paul and Barnabas continue to proclaim Jesus in the synagogue, but now they go out also to the Gentile Greeks. Their mission to both communities meets with considerable success and they stay ‘a long time’. However, they come up against the same kind of opposition which they met in Antioch.

They speak the word of grace ‘boldly’, as did the Jerusalem community when they were filled with The Holy Spirit (see 4:31). Luke uses the same expression to describe Saul’s preaching in Damascus and in Jerusalem (see 9:27-28). The courage to ‘speak boldly for the Lord’ comes from the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and the risen Jesus confirms their words ‘by granting signs and wonders to be done through them’, as he had done for the apostles (see 4:30; 5:12) and for Stephen (see 6:8).

Note that Luke refers to Barnabas and Paul as ‘apostles’. The risen Jesus, acting through the Christian community in Syrian Antioch, has sent them out (Greek: *apostellō*) on a mission, just as he sent the twelve (see 1:2).

To avoid being stoned, the missionaries flee to Lystra, some fifty kilometres south of Iconium in Lycaonia, which, like eastern Phrygia, had been incorporated by Rome into the province of Galatia.



We are reminded of the lame man who was healed at the temple gate (see 3:1-10). As Peter says in connection with that man's healing:

By faith in his name [the name of 'the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead'], his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

– Acts 3:15-16

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

– Acts 4:12

We recall the words of Jesus to the sinful but loving woman: 'your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Luke 7:50). Jesus spoke in the same way to the woman who was suffering from haemorrhages (see Luke 8:48), to the Samaritan leper (see Luke 17:19), and to the blind man in Jericho (see Luke 18:42). The role of faith in the welcoming of salvation is a constant theme throughout Luke's work (see commentary on 3:16).

This time, Luke focuses on the reaction, not of the 'unbelieving Jews' (14:2), but of the superstitious Gentiles, keen to do the right thing by the gods lest they suffer the consequences of the gods' displeasure. Since Paul was doing the talking, they assume him to be Hermes, the servant, messenger and spokesperson for Zeus. There is evidence of the worship in Lystra of local gods identified with the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes.

**<sup>8</sup>In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth.**

**<sup>9</sup>He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, <sup>10</sup>said in a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And the man sprang up and began to walk.**

**<sup>11</sup>When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!' <sup>12</sup>Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.**

**<sup>13</sup>The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice.**

**<sup>14</sup>When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting,**

**<sup>15</sup>Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you,**

**and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.**

**<sup>16</sup>In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; <sup>17</sup>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.'**

**<sup>18</sup>Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.**

**<sup>19</sup>But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds.**

**Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.**

**<sup>20</sup>But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.**

Peter would not allow Cornelius to prostrate himself before him in worship (see 10:26). Here we see Paul and Barnabas shocked at what the pagan crowd are preparing to do. They call on the crowd to abandon the 'worthless things' they call gods and to turn to the God who gives life, the God who is seen through the things he has made.

We recall Paul's words in which he reminds the Thessalonians of how they 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God'(1Thessalonians 1:9). We are reminded also of his statement in the Letter to the Romans:

Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

— Romans 1:20

While Paul and Barnabas are telling the people of Lystra that they will need to turn away from their false gods, their focus is not on this so much as on the goodness and generosity of God. Meanwhile, the Jews from Antioch who 'drove Paul and Barnabas out of their region'(13:50), and the Jews from Iconium who had attempted 'to mistreat them and to stone them'(14:5), have followed the missionaries to Lystra and have won over the crowd. Paul, like Stephen before him (see 7:58) is stoned. However, surrounded by the disciples, he recovers and goes back into the city. We think of Jesus being driven out of Nazareth, but surviving an attempt to throw him from the cliff (see Luke 4:29-30). More importantly, in Paul's getting up (Greek participle: *anastas*) and going back into the city, we see a symbol of Jesus' resurrection and return. Paul recalls this stoning when he speaks to the Corinthians of what he has had to suffer during his ministry (see 2Corinthians 11:25).

We find out later that among those who became believers at Lystra was the Jewish mother of Timothy (see 16:1). Paul gives her name as Eunice, and mentions that her mother Lois was a believer as well (see 2Timothy 1:5).

There is no mention of any opposition in Derbe. Luke tells us simply that they ‘made many disciples’ there. The apostles retrace their steps, strengthening and encouraging the disciples (Barnabas means ‘son of encouragement’, 4:36). Their own experiences of suffering were accompanied by being ‘filled with joy and the Holy Spirit’ (13:52; compare 5:41). They were able to encourage the new disciples to continue in their faith and not to be dissuaded by suffering.

Jesus had prepared his disciples for this (see Luke 21:12-19), concluding with the words: ‘By your endurance you will gain your souls’ (Luke 21:19). The disciples on the road to Emmaus were assisted by the risen Jesus to see the role of suffering in the path of the Messiah to glory (see Luke 24:26). Paul returns to this topic again and again in his letters:

We sent Timothy ... to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.

– 1Thessalonians 3:2-4

After referring precisely to the sufferings experienced on this first missionary journey, Paul writes: ‘all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2Timothy 3:12).

We have already noted the presence of elders (Greek: *presbuteroi*) in the Jerusalem church (see 11:30). At this stage, most of the early converts were Jews or Gentiles who were attached to the synagogue. Paul sets up organisational leadership in the newly founded communities along lines borrowed from the Jewish synagogue.

To pick up a ship for Antioch, they needed to go to Attalia. On arriving in Antioch they report of the work that God has done through them and with them (see 13:2), with special accent on the path of life opened up for the Gentiles (compare 11:18; 13:47-48).

**21After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch.**

**22There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.’**

**23And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.**

**24Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.**

**26From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed.**

**27When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.**

**<sup>28</sup>And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.**

There are good reasons to support the suggestion that it was at this time, that is to say, before the calling of the Jerusalem Assembly, that Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians. In it he records an episode which we will pause here to recount, since it is closely related to the Jerusalem Assembly recorded by Luke in the next chapter, and since it may even have been instrumental in bringing it about. Paul writes:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

– Galatians 2:11-14

Peter was quite happily sharing table fellowship with Gentiles who were not following the Jewish dietary laws. He may even have been disregarding these laws himself – at least that is the impression we get from Paul's account where he speaks of Peter 'living like a Gentile and not like a Jew'. This should come as no surprise in the light of the vision which Peter had at Joppa in which he was told by God to eat food that was forbidden by the law (see 10:13). His experiences in the house of Cornelius confirmed for him the significance of his vision.

However, when Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem ('from James'), Peter, Barnabas and others, withdrew from the common table and began to eat apart. Their behaviour incensed Paul because, whatever their motive, they were breaking communion, and making the Gentiles feel like second-class Christians. He condemned them for what he called their hypocrisy. They were 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel' (Galatians 2:14).

Before Paul and Barnabas had gone to Cyprus and Galatia, they had gone together to Jerusalem with relief from those in Judea affected by a famine (see 11:27-29). If, as is likely, this is the meeting described by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10, James, Cephas and John agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. However, nothing was said at that meeting about how Gentiles were to eat when sharing a meal with Jews, nor about exempting Jewish Christians from their obligations as Jews.

Since table fellowship is essential to Christian community, and since there was a long history of problems between Jews and Gentiles when it came to sharing meals, it is understandable that, at this early stage of experimenting in how best to build community, different churches may have gone in different directions. Whereas in Judea Gentile Christians probably followed Jewish food laws, in Antioch it may well have been the Jews who adapted.

While Peter seems to have been quite happy to eat with Gentiles in Antioch according to the customs that were followed there, he seems also to have been concerned as to how Jews back in Jerusalem would react when his behaviour was reported by the visitors who did not share his openness. Perhaps he behaved as he did so as not to jeopardise his mission. Whatever his reasons – and we should note that Barnabas agreed with him – Paul objected strongly. It is clear that his objections did not sway Peter or Barnabas, or Paul would surely have mentioned it. It may well have been this confrontation that was the occasion for the calling of the assembly which Luke is about to recount.

As we shall now see, the assembly decided that Gentile Christians should comply with the prescriptions of the law when sharing a meal with Jews. We will also see that, as a result of the assembly, Paul came to see the appropriateness of the decisions that were reached, at least as regards communities that were largely Jewish. In the name of charity, it was right to ask the Gentiles to respect the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters. The essential thing was not to break communion. Luke tells us that after the assembly Paul returned to the churches of Galatia, and ‘as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (Acts 16:4). The key decision of the assembly, however, and one which supported Paul’s missionary practice and his understanding of the gospel, was that Gentiles could become Christians *as Gentiles*. They were not bound by the Jewish Torah. The practical regulations were about ensuring harmony and sensitivity in a community an essential element of which was sharing in the Eucharistic celebration. Where the majority of the community was Jewish, charity pointed towards the Gentiles adapting to these laws. Where the majority was Gentile, however, the situation was different and Paul seems to have continued to explore ways in which communion of Jews and Gentiles could best be nurtured. Let us look more closely now at Luke’s account.

**<sup>1</sup>Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'**

Before his conversion, Paul could well have agreed with the teaching of the individuals from Judea. However, they are coming down to Antioch from Judea as *Christians* and their teaching conflicts with what the community in Jerusalem came to see in the light of the experience of Peter with Cornelius (see 11:18), and also with the teaching of Paul in the churches of southern Galatia concerning the place of faith in the receiving of salvation (14:8,22,23,27). Furthermore, it conflicts with the policy of James, Peter and John which they agreed to with Paul on what seems to have been an earlier visit (see Acts 14:28; Galatians 2:3).

Those who were 'disturbing' and 'unsettling' (15:24) the community in Antioch seem to be of the same group whom we find disturbing Paul's recent converts in Galatia. The debate which these individuals from Judea caused, the way in which the matter was resolved, and the decision that was reached, had enormous consequences for the future of Christianity. In many ways each new generation of Christians has to re-learn the lessons contained here. We need to set the scene carefully.

The first point to make is that God is love and that, as Peter came to realise, 'in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him' (10:35). Paul states that God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). This does not make salvation automatic. It is precisely because God is love that God respects our freedom to welcome or reject the salvation which God is offering. God does not control the world. God loves the world. God's love is unconditionally offered. Its being received is conditional upon our openness to grace and our willingness to receive the salvation that is being so lovingly offered to us.

It matters, therefore, how we behave. It matters whether we accept or reject grace. There are so many distractions and temptations around that it can be difficult for the sower to find good ground in which to sow seed (see Luke 8:11-15). When people heard what Jesus had to say to the rich man they were taken aback and said: 'then who can be saved?' (Luke 18:26). Jesus agreed that it would be impossible without God's grace. On another occasion people asked whether only a few would be saved. Jesus did not answer their question, except to say: 'Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able' (Luke 13:24).

The people of Israel knew that God loved them. They knew also that they had to be faithful to their part of the covenant, by carrying out the will of God as expressed in the law. Commitment to this obedience was symbolised by circumcision (Genesis 17:10-14).

It was already a huge step – and one with which the individuals who came down from Jerusalem to Antioch clearly did not agree – when the apostles and the others in the church in Jerusalem accepted Gentiles like Cornelius into the community (see 11:18). This decision says a lot about the extraordinary openness of Jesus himself and the powerful example he gave by the way in which he welcomed people, whoever they might be, and shared their table with such simplicity and love. This was a major factor in his being rejected. Jesus’ openness was also very impressive for those who opted to join him. Added to his example was Jesus’ clear instruction that his disciples were to take the good news of God’s love to the ends of the earth.

We have seen enough already in Luke’s account of the early community to know that it was not easy for Peter or for the others to put aside their expectation that Gentiles who wished to join the community would first have to be circumcised. The fact that the Jerusalem community accepted Cornelius says a lot about the powerful and convincing presence of Jesus’ Spirit in their midst and about the openness and willingness of the community to see what the Holy Spirit was doing among them and to let go their long held and cherished assumptions.

For all that, inevitably there would have been only a few ‘token’ Gentiles in the churches within Palestine, and their presence would not have constituted a threat to the Jewish character of the Christian communities. Christian Jews would have experienced the kind of pleasure that accompanies a magnanimous welcoming of strangers, as well as a strong sense of rightness in carrying out God’s will for them as Jews to reach out to others and to invite them to be part of the blessings promised to the descendants of Abraham. The kind of arguments which we have heard from both Peter and Paul indicate the kind of reflections upon scripture which favoured the welcoming of Gentiles. The church in Antioch also began within the synagogues (see 11:19). However, Antioch was a Gentile city and ‘a great number of Greeks became believers and turned to the Lord’(11:21). The church in Jerusalem felt the need to check on what was happening, so they sent Barnabas down to assess the situation. He was favourably impressed (see 11:22-23).

What happened in Jerusalem, and even in Antioch, was one thing. What Paul and Barnabas had done during their missionary journey was another. They had begun their proclamation concerning Jesus in the synagogues, and Gentiles who attended the synagogues (‘you others who fear God’, 13:16) were among those who became disciples. But then they took a further huge step by going to the Gentiles *as Gentiles*, and welcoming them as disciples (see 13:46-49). Even if the communities were still organised along traditional Jewish lines (14:23), Jewish Christians back in Antioch, and especially in Jerusalem, who heard reports of what had happened would have wondered where this missionary strategy would lead. What would happen when Gentiles were in the majority? – a likely outcome outside Palestine. It was one thing for a Jewish-Christian community to be an instrument of God in carrying out the promise given to Abraham. But could people become disciples of Jesus with no real connection to Jewish culture or tradition, or to the law given through Moses?

**<sup>2</sup>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 discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.**

**<sup>3</sup>So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.**

**<sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.**

**<sup>5</sup>But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'**

**<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.**

Paul understood the position of those who had come up from Judea. Luke has no need here to give Paul's arguments against them. They have already been expressed, especially in his speech in the synagogue of the other Antioch, in Phrygia, guarding the border with Pisidia (see 13:16-41): 'By this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses' (13:39). This echoes the witness given to Jesus by Peter before the Sanhedrin: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (4:12). Salvation is experienced through welcoming God's gift given in Jesus. Paul is not against circumcision (see 16:3; also 1 Corinthians 7:18). He is against circumcising Gentiles or thinking that circumcision brings salvation. Paul's views on the matter can be found in his Letter to the Galatians (see 2:12; 5:2-6; 6:12-15), which may well have been composed at this time.

Salvation, whether for Jew or Gentile, comes through faith in Jesus, the suffering servant whose love, persevering through suffering, manifests the love of God for those causing the suffering. It is for this reason that Paul insisted throughout the churches: 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God' (14:22). This is not because God has a special desire to see people suffer. Suffering is, unfortunately, part of the human condition, much of it caused by our behaviour when we fail to believe. What Paul came to see is that the way in which Jesus responded to suffering had an amazing power to change the minds and hearts of those who sinfully inflicted the suffering upon him. He witnessed this for himself when he watched Stephen die (see 7:58-60). He came to see that this was true also of the prophets, and that he should have expected it of the Messiah. It is through suffering borne patiently and responded to by forgiveness and love that we experience the salvation offered us by God. The hope is that those who reject God's proffered love will learn to cry: 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' (Luke 13:35).

The debate and the dissension was such that the community in Antioch decided to seek the discernment of the community in Jerusalem, so they sent Paul and Barnabas to give a report and discuss the matter with the apostles and the elders (already mentioned in 11:30).



The aim of the meeting is to discern the will of God. Peter, therefore, does not simply remind them of what they already know concerning the conversion of Cornelius (see 11:2-17). He highlights the fact that what happened was something that God chose to do.

He repeats what he told them on that earlier occasion: that God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit 'just as he did to us' (see 10:47; 11:17). 'God made no distinction between them and us' (compare 10:34-35; 11:12). The gift of the Spirit demonstrates that God had 'cleansed their hearts by faith (without circumcision; see 10:15; 11:9). They could not receive the Holy Spirit unless their sins had been forgiven (see 2:38). Since God did not require of them that they follow the law of Moses, God must have considered it sufficient that they open their hearts to Jesus and believe in what God is offering them through him. Peter's point is a simple one: this is what God has chosen to do; they must respect it.

He adds a second point. As Jews they have something to learn from what God has done to the Gentiles. They would all recognise that their ancestors were constantly failing to keep the law and that they themselves were constantly failing as well. Important as it is for them as Jews to be faithful to the covenant, and so to strive to keep the law, it will not be keeping the law that will give them salvation, but, as with the Gentiles, it will be 'the grace of the Lord Jesus' welcomed in 'faith' (see 13:39).

Having heard the prophetic voice, the assembly listens in silence as Barnabas and Paul once again (see 15:4) recount their experiences. Here again, the accent is not on what they or others have done, but on what 'God had done through them among the Gentiles' (see 14:27).

God worked 'signs and wonders' among the Jews in Jerusalem (see 5:12). This same God has worked 'signs and wonders' among the Gentiles. The same point is being made which Peter made earlier: 'God has made no distinction between them and us'. The Lord Jesus has graced the Gentiles with forgiveness of sin and has poured his Spirit out upon them without requiring that they keep the law. They have no right to put God to the test by demanding more.

**<sup>7</sup>After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.**

**<sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.**

**<sup>10</sup>Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?**

**<sup>11</sup>On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'**

**<sup>12</sup>The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.**

**<sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me.**

**<sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>The words of the prophets agree with this [NRSV ‘This agrees with the words of the prophets’], as it is written,**

**<sup>16</sup>‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, <sup>17</sup>so that all other peoples may seek the Lord — even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things <sup>18</sup>known from long ago.’**

Having heard the prophetic word from Peter, and having listened again to what the Lord had done through his missionaries, the assembly look to the elders of the community, under the leadership of James (see 12:17), to decide what practical measures are necessary in order to obey what God is asking of them. James accepts the fact that God has chosen to take from among the Gentiles ‘a people for his name’, in this way extending to them the grace given to Israel:

You are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

– Deuteronomy 14:2

As the loincloth clings to one’s loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the Lord, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory.

– Jeremiah 13:11

James underlines the consistency between what has just been said by Peter (Simeon is the Aramaic form of Simon) and the word of God spoken through the prophet Amos. Verse fifteen is better translated; ‘the words of the prophets agree with this’. James is understanding scripture in the light of how God has chosen to act; he is not fitting God’s action to the text. The Hebrew text reads:

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the Lord who does this.

– Amos 9:11-12

Luke has James quote from the Greek translation (the Septuagint) which omits the specific reference to Edom and interprets Amos in a more universalist sense. God’s aim is that ‘all peoples may seek the Lord – even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called’. By using the word ‘peoples’ of non-Jews, the text is highlighting their belonging to the Lord, rather than their ethnicity. The text is carefully chosen, as it is the only Old Testament text to refer to Gentiles as being ‘peoples over whom my name has been called’. We might note also the Greek version of Zechariah 2:10-11:

I will come and construct a tent in your midst, says the Lord, and in that day many nations will flee to the Lord and they will be to him as a people, and they will tent among you.

Having discerned that God has, indeed, made one people from the Jews and the Gentiles, and that the Gentiles are not being asked by God to obey the Jewish law, James turns his attention to the practical matter of how Jews and Gentiles are to live in harmonious communion as brothers and sisters sharing table fellowship. It was their belief in Jesus that was their common bond. How could the Jews and the Gentiles in the community respect the different ways in which God was drawing them to Jesus? James finds guidance in the laws of Leviticus which apply both to Jews and to ‘strangers living in the land’. Jews were used to living with Gentiles who followed these laws. Gentile converts who came to Christianity through their attendance at the synagogue would have heard these laws proclaimed, as James states in his conclusion. Other Gentiles would have some simple and clear guidelines that would enable them to fit comfortably into the community, knowing how to behave in a mixed social setting in which table sharing was especially important.

Four things are asked of ‘strangers living in the land’. The first is to ‘abstain from things polluted by idols’.

Anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to sacrifice it to the Lord, shall be cut off from the people.

– Leviticus 17:8-9

The second is to abstain from what is translated here as ‘fornication’. The reference is to Leviticus 18:6-23 which gives a list of prohibited sexual relationships, mostly concerned with incest. At the end of the list we read that these prohibitions, too, apply both to citizens and to ‘the alien who resides among you’ (Leviticus 18:26).

The third and fourth are closely related. They are to abstain from whatever has been strangled and from blood:

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people ... Anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

– Leviticus 17:10,13

James’s concern is that of a pastor. He wants to encourage hospitality and to facilitate social cohesion.

**<sup>19</sup>Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,**

**<sup>20</sup>but we should write to them to abstain only**

**from things polluted by idols**

**and from fornication**

**and from whatever has been strangled**

**and from blood.**

**<sup>21</sup>For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.’**

**<sup>22</sup>Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, <sup>23</sup>with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.**

**<sup>24</sup>Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds,**

**<sup>25</sup>we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, <sup>26</sup>who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>27</sup>We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.**

**<sup>28</sup>For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: <sup>29</sup>that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.**

**If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'**

Two men are chosen to convey the decision of the Jerusalem meeting to Antioch. They are 'leaders' and, as we are told in the following passage, 'prophets' (15:32). One is Judas Barsabbas (compare Joseph Barsabbas, 1:23). The other, Silas, is to become one of Paul's travelling companions (see 15:40). Paul calls him by his Roman name, Silvanus, at the beginning of the letters to the Thessalonians (see also 2Corinthians 1:19). His presence with Paul helps to maintain a close link with the Jerusalem church.

The letter supports Paul's practice while seeking to provide a means of easing social cohesion. It is composed in language that is typical for the promulgation of normative decrees of this kind. Though the decree is addressed to Gentiles in the province of Syria-Cilicia, of which Antioch was the capital, we are told later (see 16:1-6) that Paul promulgates it also in the districts of Lycaonia and Phrygia in the province of Galatia.

The Jerusalem church assures the church in Antioch that the people who had unsettled them had gone to Antioch of their own accord, with no authority from the community. It also claimed that its decisions were 'unanimous'. This is the eighth time that Luke has used the Greek word *homothumadon* (on this occasion translated 'unanimously'). It is the communion of mind and heart that he is stressing: sharing in the mind and heart of the risen Jesus.

Conscious that they are speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (compare 5:32), they include in the letter the points made earlier by James (see 15:20). As noted there, the aim was to assist both Jewish and Gentile Christians to live in a harmonious communion which respected their differences while assisting them to grow in mutual sensitivity. That these matters continued to pose problems for the early mixed communities is clear from a reading of Paul's letters (see 1Corinthians 5:1; 6:12-20; 8:1-13; 10:18,30).

The letter is received with ‘joy’ – a sign that it gives expression to the will of the risen Jesus and is inspired by his Spirit (compare 8:8; 13:52; also Luke 24:41,52).

Paul’s personal agreement with the spirit and the conclusions of the Jerusalem assembly can be seen from his statement to the Ephesians concerning the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the one Christian communion. Addressing himself to Gentile Christians, he writes:

Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

– Ephesians 2:13-18

The encouragement (Greek: *paraklēsis*) expressed in the letter from Jerusalem is supported by the two ‘prophets’ from the Jerusalem community, who continue to ‘encourage (Greek: *parakaleō*) and strengthen the believers’. They are sent back to Jerusalem in ‘peace’ – a further sign of the presence of the Spirit of the risen Jesus (compare 9:31; 10:36; also Luke 24:36).

**<sup>30</sup>So they were sent off and went down to Antioch.**

**When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.**

**<sup>31</sup>When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation [‘encouragement’].**

**<sup>32</sup>Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers.**

**<sup>33</sup>After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. [<sup>34</sup>]**

**<sup>35</sup>But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.**

[<sup>34</sup>] Some ancient manuscripts add: ‘But it seemed good to Silas to remain’.