

## **Sermon at Christ Well on 6 January 2019 - Acts.**

Decided to press on with our encounters with Paul in the book of Acts, because the passage didn't feel inappropriate for Epiphany...and most of us will have considered further the story of the magi this morning. Why this decision? In part, it is a passage about journeying and faith – as is the central story for Epiphany; it is also a passage about diversity and inclusion – and the story of the magi is a powerful one about prominent Gentile visitors to the new Jewish king.

It is a very mixed group of people who gather in Antioch at the beginning of Acts 13 – and, in a way, this is extraordinary, because of Saul's earlier narrowness as an ultra-orthodox Jewish teacher and leader. Now, you may find certain aspects of Saul, Paul's ministry difficult, but from the start he is happy to talk to anyone and, in some ways, work with all kindred spirits whatever their background. Later in the passage, he is soon at home in Cyprus and Paphos.

Most churches today would say that they are truly inclusive...no barriers erected, either consciously or negligently. CW has child-friendly status, is also dementia-friendly, meets in premises which are as obstacle-free as possible, has hosted a same-sex blessing and has a minister who mentors the young Unitarian minister in Cardiff. We must never rest on our laurels, however...for we may not always see things as others see them. Inclusion is always a work in progress.

Central to discernment within the diverse group described at the beginning of Acts 13 were prayer and fasting. Now, certain forms of fasting may be in the minds of those who are contemplating diets of one sort or another in these post-Christmas days of 'counting the cost', but this doesn't really help us to engage with the centrality of fasting in Christian spirituality. Yes, there are some Christian traditions in which it remains absolutely central to the Christian way of life...and, of course, it is also important in other world faiths. Most of the Protestant churches of Western Europe have somehow let it slip from their radar, however, and this may not be a good thing.

Worth a fuller comment... Scripture does not command Christians to fast. God does not require or demand it of Christians. At the same time, the Bible presents fasting as something that is good, profitable, and beneficial. Heard this evening that the book of Acts records believers fasting before they made

important decisions (Acts 13:2; 14:23). Fasting and prayer are often linked together (Luke 2:37; 5:33). Too often, the focus of fasting is on the lack of food. Instead, the purpose of fasting should be to take your eyes off the things of this world to focus completely on God. Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God, and to ourselves, that we are serious about our relationship with Him. Fasting helps us gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God... and many believers who do fast speak of a heightened spirituality, spiritual awareness which goes alongside abstinence from food.

Although fasting in Scripture is almost always a fasting from food, there are other ways to fast. Anything given up temporarily in order to focus all our attention on God can be considered a fast (1 Corinthians 7:1-5 – celibacy as fasting). Fasting should be limited to a set time, especially when fasting from food. Extended periods of time without eating can be harmful to the body. Fasting is not intended to punish the flesh, but to redirect attention to God.

By taking our eyes off the things of this world, we can more successfully turn our attention to Christ. Fasting is not a way to get God to do what we want. Fasting changes us, not God. Fasting is not a way to appear more spiritual than others. Fasting is to be done in a spirit of humility and a joyful attitude. Matthew 6:16-18 declares, “When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

II Having set off on significant journeys, in Paphos, Paul encounters Elymas, a magician with powerful friends. The governor wanted to know more and Elymas (Bar-Jesus... simply picks up on a common name of the times) stood in his way. He was a barrier – literally, a physical barrier. We learn, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Paul will deal with potential obstacles ‘head on’ immediately – there is no room or time for procrastination when the gospel is at stake.

I hardly need to say that we live in very cautious times. The smallest concerns have to have policies a-plenty, to show that they have considered virtually every possible outcome if something should – extraordinarily – go wrong. In spite of heightened levels of awareness among the young and evidence which suggests that the world is now safer than it was, the wings of freedom are well

and truly clipped for most children and young people. The life of the churches is often characterised by caution – worry, possibly justified, about what people will think, will do, will say. I understand this and, to a degree, I am a part of this culture. Nonetheless, there are times when we may need to face up to the responsibility of facing up to obstacles head-on.

Given Paul's own personal experiences, you may feel that there is irony on the fact that Elymas is blinded on account of his interference...although as with Paul, the blindness is only temporary. You may feel that this mitigates – to a degree – in which Paul seems to deal with people rather more harshly than Jesus himself would have done. Of course, many of the MSS dealing with the childhood Jesus were outrageously fanciful and didn't make it to the New Testament...and it may be that Luke picked up on the echoes of some of these. You may have heard of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

The text describes the life of the child Jesus, with fanciful, and sometimes malevolent, supernatural events, comparable to the trickster nature of the god-child in many Greek myths. One of the episodes involves Jesus making clay birds, which he then proceeds to bring to life, an act also attributed to Jesus in Quran 5:110<sup>[21]</sup> and in a medieval work known as Toledot Yeshu, although Jesus' age at the time of the event is not specified in either account.

When Joseph and Mary's neighbours complain about Jesus' alleged violence towards other children, they are miraculously struck blind by Jesus. Jesus then starts receiving lessons, but arrogantly tries to teach the teacher instead, upsetting the teacher who suspects supernatural origins. Jesus is amused by this suspicion, which he confirms, and revokes all his earlier apparent cruelty. Subsequently he resurrects a friend who is killed when he falls from a roof, and heals another who cuts his foot with an axe. Interesting – widespread and lingered.

Anyway, to return to Acts: we do not carve the powers demonstrated by Paul – at least, I hope not – but something of the power of God is at our disposal. It may be that we have to go back to the beginning of the chapter to remind ourselves of how we are to harness this... prayer and fasting. For Paul, at least, there was never going to be any substitute.