

SERMON – 16/6/24

'The Appointing Spirit'

"While [the church at Antioch] were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off ." (Acts 13:2-3)

When was the last time God spoke to us as a church? I don't mean to ask when the last time was that God spoke to individuals within the church – that happens constantly. I mean, when was the last time God spoke to us *as a church*? Are we ever conscious, that God might be seeking to communicate with us as a *fellowship*, or are our horizons in reality much narrower than that?

Quite a number of people have spoken to me over the last few weeks about this sermon series on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit and as we draw to a close this morning, I dare to believe that perhaps God is speaking not only to individuals but also in some way to us *as a church* at this time, particularly as we seek to discern the best way to shape our ministry and mission in company with our sister churches across Kinross-shire.

This morning's four-verse reading from the Book of Acts prompts me to draw comparisons between the church at Antioch and ourselves at Kinross Parish Church. The episode of which we have read today is a significant one. On the day of His Ascension into heaven, the Lord Jesus had told His followers that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Thus far the Gospel has been shared only in Jerusalem and its immediate Judean and Samaritan surroundings, as far as Antioch, a great trading cross-roads on the border between what is now Syria and Turkey, but here in Acts 13 we read of the genesis of the first *overseas* mission, the trip made by Saul and Barnabas with young John Mark to the island of Cyprus, the beginning of a missionary work that continues to this day to the very ends of the earth (as we have been hearing in regard to Uganda this morning). To what extent does that chime with *our* experience of church? Let's

take a closer look.

We are told that within the congregation at Antioch there were five people who were gifted as prophets and teachers. They are named for us, and even though we are not given very much information about them, what we *are* told gives us much food for thought. First of all there is Barnabas, whose name famously means 'Son of Encouragement.' Luke has told us earlier in the book that Barnabas' original name was Joseph and that he was a Levite who hailed from Cyprus. He had become a Christian very early in the life of the Church and was quite probably one of the Christians of greatest maturity in the church at Antioch. Next there is Simeon who is given the Latin nickname 'Niger' which means 'black' and which tells us that, although with a name like Simeon he was almost certainly a Jew, he was originally from somewhere like Sudan or Ethiopia. Then we meet Lucius of Cyrene. Perhaps the name Cyrene rings a bell with you – it was another Cyrenian, *Simon*, who was press-ganged into carrying Jesus' cross on the way to Calvary – but what you maybe don't know is that Cyrene was in what we today call Libya. The fourth man we meet at Antioch is Manaen, who was probably the most local. His name means Comforter. However, he too has an interesting background, having been brought up in the court of King Herod as a companion to the young prince and doubtless having a very wide circle of contacts amongst the high and mighty of the land. Then, finally, there is Saul, again a relatively local man from Tarsus in what is now southern Turkey, a scholar, an expert in the Jewish religion, who had been converted to Christ and specifically commissioned by God to take the Good News to the Gentile world.

But what we are also told in this first verse of the chapter is that these men were less marked out in the church because of their origins or their connexions than because of their gifts. They were prophets and teachers, set apart by God, doubtless in different measures, to minister His Word as revealed in the Scriptures, to apply that Word as prompted by the Holy Spirit in the current circumstances of the church, and to make known the will of God with authority.

Now, I don't think these five men were necessarily representative of the church in Antioch – there would have been others in the congregation who had been – born and bred in the

town and never lived more than a mile or two from where they had been born, and there would have been others in the church with very different gifts from God to use in the building up of His people and in reaching out to the community – but if you stop to think about it, that’s not so very different at all from our congregation here in Kinross. Amongst our number, as well as those who have been all their days in Kinross-shire, we have folk from across the United Kingdom, people with European, African, Far Eastern and trans-Atlantic backgrounds, and we have people who have connections of one kind or another to every level of society. And as well as those with recognised gifts from God and various named positions in the church, there are those who are simply getting on with what the Lord has given them to do for the blessing of others.

But then we read this: “While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said *to the church*, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” What, I wonder, does this have to say to us as a church?

I believe it has some fairly significant things to say to us as we seek God’s will for us in these tumultuous days. It is unquestionably true that each one of us has a responsibility to wait upon God in the quiet of our own place of prayer. There is also an important place for discussion and prayer not just in formal groups like the Kirk Session or in housegroups but in our various groups and circles of friends within the church as we talk in our homes or on the street corners about this or that aspect of the life of the Gospel. But there is also time for the *whole* diverse fellowship of believers in a place to gather and to know that we belong together in Christ, that He is our Head and that we in our diversity constitute His body in this community alongside members of other congregations; to humble ourselves before Him and wait for His guiding, making ourselves open and available to Him and then sharing in whatever way we can in the fulfilling of His purposes. It is something along those lines that we have been seeking to do in recent months in conversation with folks from Orwell & Portmoak and from Cleish and Fossoway, and as we seek with Kythe to shape a youth ministry - and that needs to continue.

If you look closely at what Luke tells us of that day at worship in Antioch, you see that the Holy Spirit (perhaps through the mouth of an individual with the gift of prophecy and through a corporate discernment of the rightness of this course of action) told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which they had been called. Now it seems to me entirely likely that Barnabas and Saul had already as individuals (or perhaps the two of them together) sensed the call of God to go to Cyprus with the Gospel. It was Barnabas' homeland and he would naturally have felt burdened to go and tell his own people the Good News about Jesus Christ. Saul had been told when he was converted that he was God's 'chosen instrument to carry the Lord's name before the Gentiles' (Acts 9:15). But the really significant thing is that here the call was being confirmed by (and among) the *whole people of God* as they met together for worship and for prayer.

It is the Holy Spirit who appoints but it is through the whole church that that appointment is made. I have to say that I think it is very likely at this time that God is calling people from our congregation to step out in the service of the Kingdom, whether perhaps as missionaries to another place, whether to a formal ministry of some kind in the life of the church locally or nationally or to Gospel service of another kind, from evangelism in our community to pastoral or youth work within the congregation to practical service in everything from the live-streaming of our services to volunteering at Family Week, from getting involved with Traidcraft or Kythe or the Eco-Church to working behind the scenes with a paintbrush or a mop or a vase or a laptop.

If you feel a sense of God nudging you in some way at this time, then speak to me about it and speak to others in the fellowship about it. Equally, if you have a sense that someone in this church ought to be serving God in some new way, then it is for *you* to share that stirring with others and to sow the seed with the person concerned, that together as a whole church we may humble ourselves before God, testing and honing the call and seeking to discern what appointment the Holy Spirit may be making. That is how God has been at work in the church from its earliest days and still today.

That's what was going on in Antioch. The church there was

culturally and socially diverse, and so are we – locals and incomers, people of every social background. The church there contained gifted people – those with what we might call a specific ministry, and those who just got on with what God made them good at in the service of the Kingdom – and our church is no different today. But where I think we have something important to learn from the Christians in Antioch is in the significance they gave to the times when they gathered all together to worship the Lord and to seek after Him in prayer, and the unity and support they displayed when some of their number were given a specific task to perform. Now what is God saying to us as a Church? Perhaps as we pray together this morning and as we chat with one another in the new ways that we are doing that at this time, we may be open to the Holy Spirit's leading and step out *together* in faith.

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, appoint each one of us to the tasks that you have prepared for us as members of the Body of Christ. Raise up from among us those who will go to proclaim the Good News of Christ where it has never been heard before, those who will declare the message of the Kingdom in situations where things need to change, those who will awaken faith in others, those who will nurture your people, and those who will teach the Word. Raise up from among us those with gifts of wisdom and knowledge, faith and healing, prophecy and discernment, the ability to speak the language of the Kingdom in ways that others can hear and understand. Raise up from among us those who will trust, those who will give, those who will administer, those who will serve, those who will inspire children and mentor young people and those who will visit the sick, the elderly and the bereaved, raise up those who will sing and make music, those who will sit and listen to others, those who will dream dreams, those who will sew and create and those who will exercise ministry through flowers, those who will look after property and those who will operate technology, raise up those who will pick up litter and engage with our community. Appointing Spirit, give us all ears to hear your call.

Come, Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life and bring us now and always with Jesus into the Father's presence that we may live

our lives for you in the atmosphere of eternity, worshipping you with every breath, following Christ with every step, trusting you in every moment, for we ask these things in Jesus' name.