

Acts 13:16-26

16 Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: 'Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! 17 The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; 18 for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness; 19 and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. 20 All this took about 450 years. 'After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. 21 Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled for forty years. 22 After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: "I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do." 23 'From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised. 24 Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. 25 As John was completing his work, he said: "Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." 26 'Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.

Luke 1:67-79

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:
68 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David
70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us –
72 to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.'

Message of salvation

Acts 13:16-26

In the reading from Acts Paul is giving a quick edited history of the Jewish people, describing the run up to the birth of Jesus in a sermon which was preached in Pisidian Antioch which is not far from modern day Antalya. We're all familiar now with the story, or we think we are, but at that time, Christianity was barely even a word. At the time it was known as The Way. Paul was passionately committed to telling anyone who would listen about a Jewish rabbi from Nazareth, who upset a lot of people because he claimed to be the Messiah. The one prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures for several hundred years. So Paul's outlining how things reached the point where they knew they had to tell the world and not just the Jews. Over the centuries since, there have been many successful, less successful, and even downright wicked attempts by millions of people to live out what they thought Jesus taught. We still, like Paul, have to go back and look again at what Jesus actually said and did, without letting all the other stuff get in the way. The Jews believed in Yahweh, but whatever you want to call Him, if you believe there's a God, there can logically only really be one all powerful being, or He's not all powerful. So our belief as a church is and has always been that God chose to make himself known to the world in the only way we could possibly understand, and that was to be born as a human being.

This was clearly not what the Jews had expected to happen, Paul here as I said is giving us the history of God's relationship with the Jewish people, which it has to be said was a chequered one. Although Paul says that as a people they were chosen and prospered by God, he also says a little testily, '*for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness*', and then that '*all this took about 450 years*'. So a bit of a drawn out project then, to try and correct the idea found in parts of the early history books like Judges, of a warlike God slaughtering whole communities. In the NT we see a truer picture of a loving, just and merciful creator who wants his creation and everything in it to flourish. You'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise, what with the downright obscene ideas that the church has had over the centuries, like the Inquisition or the crusades. But these are human acts of destruction. God does not intervene in our acts of free will.

God broke through from time to time with people like King David, who although he did horrific things, when it came to his own son Absalom being killed, having usurped his father's throne, he said this: *my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you*. This was really something after God's heart. The willingness to sacrifice your own interests for others. Throughout the time before Jesus, God chose to work with particular people who obviously didn't have the benefit of faith in Christ and so whose understanding of God was very limited. And yet Isaiah's chapter 53 is a startling description of the suffering of Jesus, written hundreds of years before it happened.

How could Isaiah have possibly known? The explanation is that the Holy Spirit operated at particular times to carry out God's plan, in spite of these unreliable men and women of faith.

King David's eventual descendants were Joseph and Mary, and the last of the great prophets turned out to be Jesus' cousin John the Baptist who recognised Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus described John as 'the Elijah who was to come', in other words a great prophet. Not to mention John's own father Zechariah who proclaimed at John's birth that John was 'the prophet of the most high', drawing attention to the imminent birth of the Messiah. Immanuel, God incarnate.

This was the turning point in human history.

And today this is what we celebrate.

That in order to show his intent to save the world from itself, God himself would go to the length of actually becoming a man with a family and a job and a community.

Also, someone who put the poor, the sick and the marginalised at the forefront of his thoughts, who spoke uncomfortable truth to the rich and powerful, who ate and drank with 'sinners', who (would you believe?) was put to death for his religious beliefs! Who was God. That's what we believe.

So tonight we celebrate the only hope for the world.

Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. Amen