

## 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.

## The coming King Acts 13:16-26

In our reading today Paul is presenting a potted history of God's relationship with the Jewish people, describing the run up to the birth of Jesus. St Paul was one of the early tourists in Turkey – not exactly a holiday though, more of a preaching tour with prison breaks! The sermon we heard from the book of Acts 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, let alone something much of the world believed in. At the time the Jesus movement was just known as The Way. Paul was passionately committed to telling anyone who would listen about the events surrounding this 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.

Forget the history of the *next* 2000 years, because it's mostly irrelevant to the basic facts described by Paul. Over the centuries, there was layer upon layer of 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. Or just another fictional superhero. 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, because to claim equality with God, as Jesus did, for them, was blasphemy, for which the punishment was death by stoning. But let's go back a bit.

Paul here as I said is presenting the history of Yahweh's relationship with the Jewish people, which was a chequered one it has to be said. Although Paul says that as a people they were chosen and prospered by God, he also says rather tetchily, *'for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness'*, and then estimates that *'all this took about 450 years'*. So a bit of a drawn out project then, to try and transform their idea of the warlike God of parts of the early history books like Judges, credited with slaughtering whole communities, into a truer picture of a God who eventually intends to bring the whole world to a true understanding of who He is. A loving, just and merciful creator who wants his creation and everything in it to flourish. You'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise with all the bad press He gets, what with the downright obscene ideas, like the Inquisition and the crusades, that the church has had over the centuries.

But it's us with our free will who are responsible for our acts of destruction and selfishness. Don't let's pin it on God. It's fascinating that the people God chose to make use of were often very dysfunctional characters, like Abraham, Moses and King David. But nevertheless some of the time they understood God's true nature. Paul quotes 1 Sam. 13:13-14 *"I [God] have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do."* God broke through with people like David, who although he did horrific things, when it came to his own son Absalom being killed, having usurped his father David's throne, 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. The prophets could scarcely have understood what much of their writings meant at the the time, at least in terms of their future meaning. Isaiah's chapter 53 is a startling description of the suffering of Jesus, written hundreds of years before it actually happened. How could Isaiah have possibly known? The explanation is that the Holy Spirit operated at particular times to push forward God's plan, in spite of his unreliable men and women of faith. Anyway 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.

John recognised Jesus as the Messiah, and 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'. So whether or not the religious hierarchy approved, God was speaking, yet again, through specific people for a specific purpose, drawing attention to the birth of the Messiah. Immanuel, God incarnate.

Who even imagined then what that meant in practice?

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 would go to the length of actually coming in person, physically, a real and actual man with a family and a job and a community who knew him well.

Also himself a child refugee, a man 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 (this is the supreme irony) was put to death for his religious beliefs!

Who was God.

That's what we believe. That's what I believe.

So we celebrate. Today. The only hope for the world.

The way, the truth and the life.

Hallelujah, Jesus is born!