

Bennoch church: 10th July 2016

All aboard. Welcome to the journey. I hope you do not suffer from sea sickness! Our first stop is Antioch. What can you expect to see. Today it lies in ruins, part of Turkey, but, travel in your mind back to a place that was once part of the ancient trade routes. A city that once rivalled Alexandria as the chief city of the Near East. A cosmopolitan metropolis of half a million people. It was culturally pluralistic, religiously diverse and theologically, a bit liberal. Circumcision was not such a big issue here. In biblical times, a key location in the Roman empire, head quarters of Rome's Syrian legion and a centre of Hellenistic Judaism. Welcome to Antioch. We enter its port and we stand on its streets.

This is where it all began. It was here in Antioch that the believers were first called 'Christians'. But please note, this was no term of endearment. They are being mocked. This was Paul's base, the starting point for his great missionary journeys. You stand in a place of history.

History has a funny way of working things out. Persecution of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem brings some of them north to Antioch. To the Jewish inhabitants, they talk about Jesus, as Good News from God. Others come from across the sea to witness to the Gentiles. So it seems that Antioch becomes a ferment of evangelical activity. Amidst today's ruins, there was a

lot of chatter about Jesus. So much so, that news reaches Jerusalem of what is happening in this city.

Have you heard? Have you heard what is happening in Antioch! People are believing in the Lord! Is it true? Is God working his power in that place, amongst Jews and Gentiles alike? We need to send a delegation to find out what is actually happening. Imagine, the churches are full in Kirkcaldy, the streets are full of chatter about Jesus and a delegation is coming from 121 George Street, to hear the story!

This rapid spread and movement of a new religious force was unheard of in antiquity. Religion took hold slowly and over time. After all Judaism had been around for centuries. But here is something new. It should not totally surprise us. Christianity followed where Judaism was. In a sense, Judaism acted like a conduit. It opened the door, to new conversations about God.

There was some tension in the air. It is not all good news. There were those who had reservations about the conversion of Gentiles to Christianity. The institution was cautious, even resistant, of what God might be doing, here in Antioch! Were they still following the Laws of Moses? Never mind debates at the General Assembly about human sexuality. They're tame affairs, compared to the fierce arguments, over issues like circumcision! If you don't believe me, have a look at Galatians

chapter two. In Act 15, Paul and Barnabas even had to go to Presbytery, in Jerusalem, to state their opposition to these demands.

The person sent, is a man named Barnabas. *'Hi guys, what's going on here?'* Barnabas is from Cyprus and so less parochial than the people in Jerusalem. He acts as a mediator between the local church and the Jerusalem authorities. He is open to what God is up to. And true to his nature he is a man of encouragement. Barnabas recognises the work of God and rejoices in it. He was certainly the right man for the job. In the midst of our decline, we might find this exponential growth, almost fanciful. But here in Antioch, many people were coming to God.

I wonder if so much was going on that Barnabas needed some help? What better man than Saul, let's call him Paul, to exploit this situation. Persecutor of Christians - not the best part of his CV. Man of the Damascus road experience. He is now in the dictionary and held in suspicion by some, until Barnabas intervened on his behalf. He is in fear of his life, people in Jerusalem had tried to kill him. This mission work is dangerous! So Paul is sent to Tarsus and this is where Barnabas seeks out his old friend, and rescues him from obscurity. Tarsus was 100 miles to the north and would have been a major undertaking for Barnabas to do this. He must have thought it was worth it!

Paul is not yet the great apostle, but is about to make his mark. Not just here in Antioch, but in history. There are not many men you can say that about. I was thinking, imagine a whole year in the life of the church in Kirkcaldy, with Barnabas and Saul as leaders and teachers! Might get us moving a bit!

The Spirit of God is here in direct contrast to the conservatism of the religious authorities. As the church grew, some were saying, wait a minute, what about the laws of God, as we find in the Old Testament. What is happening here, is the spirit of God is pushing ahead, in spite of the early church and their hesitation about Gentile Christians and what Mosaic laws said they should, or should not obey.

You stand in Antioch, one of the cradles of Gentile Christianity. Significant for the expansion of the church throughout the Roman empire, and beyond. You stand in the streets where journey's began.

So onwards to Ephesus. The story and our journey continues.
Amen

[Hand over boat to St Bryce Kirk](#)