

Two weeks ago we explored the wonderful story of Peter's miraculous escape from prison. Peter was aided and abetted by the passionate prayer of the early church who interceded for him.

As I have shared before, there are two human figures which dominate Luke's account of the early church – Peter and Paul. In his account Luke leaves Peter and picks up the story of Paul again. Paul, or Saul as he is still known, begins his recorded ministry at the Syrian city of Antioch. Luke tells us that:

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.
(Acts 11:25-26)

Antioch was located in Syria and had a population of somewhere between one hundred and fifty and three hundred thousand people. It was a crowded, cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse city that Paul visits first in around the year 43AD. Antioch had experienced a major earthquake that damaged, destroyed or severely weakened buildings. It was a building zone. Like most Roman cities, Antioch had a very small proportion of very rich inhabitants, with a majority of its citizens being desperately poor. Life expectancy was around 30 years of age. Historian and sociologist Rodney Stark says of the Antioch that Paul and Barnabas ministered in:

Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair and hatred...A city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence.
(Rodney Stark)

It was in this setting that a thriving Christian community had been established by believers who had fled persecution in Jerusalem. Christianity offered hope to those who previously had no hope. From the outset Christianity was primarily an urban movement that experienced its most fruitful growth in the chaotic streets and neighborhoods of Roman cities. Where cities bred a sense of dislocation, the Christian faith offered hope and a deep sense of connection and community.

This observation gives some understanding to the rapid growth of the church in China over the last few decades. At the same time the Chinese Christian population has grown from 500,000 people in 1940 to 80 million today China has become an urban superpower. Did you know there are 160 cities in China with a population of over one million?

Lets get back to Antioch.

Such was the strength of the Christian community in Antioch, as well as its strategic location it quickly became the most important city after Jerusalem in the expansion of the church.

Our author Luke is a theologian. He writes to communicate the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But Luke is equally a historian and the stories he recounts are grounded in real, verifiable history. He speaks of real people, real places and real events. And so he gives us some detail of the church at Antioch:

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.
(Acts 13:1)

The leadership of the church in Antioch reflected the cultural and ethnic diversity of the city. Palestinians, black Africans, Jews and Gentiles all had a role in leadership. Luke goes on to say:

While they were worshiping 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)

The church is at it again; it is praying. And just as it did on the day of Pentecost, and again when the church interceded for Peter as he languished in jail, when the church prays, something happens. This time the Holy Spirit spoke clearly into their meeting, telling the church to set apart Paul and Barnabas for missionary service. The specifics of the call are not clear. Nowhere is the church told where Paul and Barnabas are to be sent, just that they are to 'go'!

It's critical to note the centrality of fasting and prayer in these two verses.

It was in the midst of a time of worship marked with fasting and prayer that the clear, unmistakable voice of the Holy Spirit was heard and then responded to.

And it was with worship marked by fasting and prayer that the church commissioned Paul and Barnabas to go.

Passionate prayer was a mark of the early church. In my view there is a direct correlation between the prayerful heart of the people of God and the activity of God in their midst. It is for this reason that perhaps the most important prayer we can pray is the pleading words of the disciples to Jesus, 'Lord, teach us how to pray.'

The growth of the church on Korea over the last one hundred years has been remarkable, as the table on the screen attests.

In 1920 there were 320,000 Protestant Christians. In 1960 there were 620,000. This growth was fostered by faithful Western missionaries, including many from Australia. But in 1995 growth exploded to 8.8 million protestant Christians. Again this growth is closely correlated by the massive movement of Koreans to urban centers like Seoul. But this growth is also undergirded by passionate prayer. Korean Christians pray fervently and without ceasing. They pray and they fast. It is a distinctive of the Korean Church that its leaders – Catholic and Protestant – credit for the revival growth they have enjoyed the last four decades. Paul Yongi-Cho has said that Korean Christians know what it is to pray the cost of revival.

Back to Antioch and after what undoubtedly was a tear-filled farewell, Paul and Barnabas head off on what would become a three year adventure, spreading the gospel through Cyprus and then regions in what is today modern Turkey.

The commissioning of Paul and Barnabas is an example of a fundamental truth. At its origins Christianity is not an institutional religion; it is a missionary movement undergirded by passionate prayer.

This missionary heart reflects the very character and nature of God.

The story of the Bible is that of a God who is on a mission to search for and to rescue men and women created in his image who are lost to sin. This mission culminates in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's own son. If we ever have any doubt as to the missional intention of God we need look no further than Jesus. David Livingstone put it this way:

*God had only one Son and he made that Son a missionary.
(David Livingstone)*

Jesus commissioned the church to carry his missionary mandate into the world; to make disciples, to proclaim good news, to teach and to baptize.

Mission is not an optional extra for the church; mission defines the church.

The resurrected Jesus said to his disciples, and he says to us:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. (John 20:21)

Jesus commission and sends us in the power of the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world. Archbishop Rowan Williams has put it this way:

*It's not the church of God which has a mission but the God of mission who has a church.
(Archbishop Rowan Williams)*

And so it was that God sent Paul and Barnabas to proclaim good news through their world.

The temptation for them and for the church at Antioch would have been to settle for the success and the relative safety and security they enjoyed. In a time of uncertainty and in a culture of persecution common sense would have said to stay put.

But they did not serve a stay put God.

They were not called to be settled, but to be sent.

You see, the moment the church stops moving in mission is the day it starts to seize up and die.

Paul's favorite metaphor for the church is that of a body. Now the human bodies is a miraculous conglomeration of blood and bone, muscles and sinew, skin and flesh all working in harmony. The health of our body relies on movement – the circulation of blood, the stretching of limbs and the use of our muscles.

I know what happens to my body when it stops moving as it should – when I stop walking each morning. I get fat, or should I say, I get fatter! And as I get fatter, I get sicker and so it goes on. The body is designed for movement, and so too is the church.

The church, our church, is not called to be frozen in place, but to move as and where the Holy Spirit sends and directs it.

Please watch a powerful illustration of this point:

Play Grand Central Freeze

In an act of street theatre two hundred people on cue freeze in place for two minutes in the midst of a bustling train station. For witnesses it is completely disconcerting. I love that line right at the end, as one observer says, 'That is the weirdest thing I have ever seen.'

One of the weirdest things our world can see is a church frozen in place. It is also tragically sad.

We are not a settled people; we are a sent people.

Ralph showed that video clip at 12two last Sunday night. He also told another story about wasted opportunities with tragic consequences.

There once was a great violinist who upon his death willed his marvelous violin to the city of his birth. But there was one condition. The instrument must never be played again. This condition condemned the violin to decay, for it is a peculiarity of the wood exceptional violins are made of that as long as the instrument is played regularly, it shows little wear. Prolonged periods of inactivity lead to inevitable decay.

The inevitable happened: the exquisite mellow-toned violin become worm-eaten in its beautiful museum case, valueless except as a relic.

Too many church communities become relics, museum pieces that might be good to look at, but through their inactivity of no good use to anyone.

The church through much of Europe is a tragic case in point. The birth place of the reformation and the modern missionary movement is littered with empty churches and cathedrals transformed that are no more than museums – a reminder of a sadly bygone era.

You see, God called the church into being in order that he might play his song of salvation in and through its life. We are God's choice instrument. The moment the music stops is the moment we begin to decay.

There are always plenty of reasons why we could, even should pull back from mission. Mission is a dangerous, messy and costly business.

It's especially tempting to pull back from mission when things are going well. Things were going well in Antioch. The church was growing and leadership was strong. Why send two of the leaders who had been a part of that success on a dangerous journey with an unknown destination and duration?

As much as it will have been tempting for the church at Antioch to settle and stay put, so it is tempting for us at Newlife to do the same.

Things are good. The church is growing steadily – around 10% so far this year. We have more kids, more families, more young adults and more people coming to faith. God is blessing us. Our tithes and offerings are ahead of budget - all this by and through the grace of God. We are one big, happy and yet sometimes dysfunctional family.

And so why mess with a good thing through the risk of a church plant and a building program? After all, the research tells us that most church plants fail and building programs are just a costly pain in the butt - right?

If it's not broken...why fix it?

But we are not called to be a settled people, but a sent people.

Our dreams to establish a new church campus in the northern Gold Coast and to extend this building have been birthed in four years of prayer. As God always has and will - he is sending out into risky, faith building adventures in mission.

Another step in this adventure occurred a month ago when we had a congregational meeting and decided to call Orrell Battersby to lead our new campus plant. Orrell and his wife Christine are here with us this morning. Please welcome them as they come up to share with me.

Interview Orrell

God is sending Orrell and Christine to the northern Gold Coast to lead a band of fellow adventurers in establishing a new faith community there. Perhaps you are one of those people? Perhaps God is whispering to you right now?

But before we recruit our first campus plant member or hold our first service, we are called to bathe this venture in prayer. Unless God builds this new campus, we labor in vain. The church at Antioch did not send out Paul and Barnabas with good wishes, but with passionate prayer.

And so I am unashamedly calling everyone here to pray for Orrell and Christine and all the dreaming, planning and preparation that needs to happen between now and June next year. In your newsletter today is a small flyer that invites you to join a prayer team that will pray for our new campus, even now. Each week we will email or post to this team particular prayer points that can guide them in interceding for this ministry. I'd love it if hundreds of us would commit to weekly prayer like this.

The dream to plant a church on the northern Gold Coast was birthed in prayer four years ago, and the vision was confirmed earlier this year at a 24 hour prayer vigil. During that time half a dozen or so people gathered to pray through the night over in the chapel. They sensed God speaking to them in a powerful way. They recorded what they sensed the Holy Spirit was saying. Those words are recorded on the flyer and I encourage you to read them to hear what God is saying to us.

If you want to sign up for prayer updates, just fill in the form and drop it in to the Info Desk today or the office during the week.

God is not just sending Orrell and Christine and the team they lead into mission; he is sending all of us.

There are so many opportunities to be on mission through Newlife,

Here are a few:

We always need more volunteers to serve our growing children's ministry. We especially need Godly men who will invest in the next generation. Please speak with Viv Batt, our Children's Pastor, if you would like to find out more.

Streetcare is an amazing ministry to the poor of our community. Every Saturday a handful of people host a BBQ for people who desperately need to hear Good News. Two key couples that serve Streetcare, Graham and Di Drake and Karl and Elwyn Buderus, are soon to leave us for other places. They leave a huge hole. But their departure also provides a great opportunity for others – perhaps even you – to get involved in a ministry that brings hope and healing in Jesus' name. Speak to Graham if God is nudging you.

Playgroup, Crossroads, Kidshope – there are amazing opportunities for all of us to connect with the community outside the four walls of this church with the good news of Jesus.

Every Wednesday and Friday morning a faithful group of people gather to pray for this church and community. Perhaps God is calling you to join them? We need to be bathed in prayer, to be hearing from God.

And just in case you are running excuses through your mind right now, remember at the end of the day there are no excuses. Every person who claims faith in Jesus is on mission.

No one is too old, or too young, or too busy.

Every one of us has gifts given to us by God, and for those gifts God has for us a corresponding service.

Of course this does not stop us from having feelings of inadequacy. Who are we to think that God could use us, or that we are anything special?

There is nothing new in feeling inadequate – in fact we are in good company.

The prophet Isaiah had a vivid, awe-inspiring vision of God that made his jaw drop and his legs tremble. In the light of God's holiness, Isaiah was confronted with everyone of his inadequacies. He grieved his sin and rebellion against God that he thought must preclude him from ever being useful to God. But God had other ideas. In his vision, an angel

touches his lips with a burning coal, cleansing him of his sin, removing his guilt and shame. His vision continues with these words:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"
(Isaiah 6:8)

And so God sends Isaiah to be a prophetic missionary to the people of Israel during a time of extreme tumult.

Like Isaiah, I am inadequate. There is nothing in me that commends me as someone worthy of God's commission. But through my faith in Jesus, God has touched my life, just as he touched Isaiah's lips and has called me into service. He has sent me. And he has sent you.

So, where is God sending you?

Will you go where he leads?