

Sermon Given by

Simon Scott

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Acts 13:13-52 - "Jews and Gentiles for Jesus"

'You have a world to win' That, I'm told was the final sentence of Marx's first communist manifesto. He was fired by an ideal which he wanted to criss-cross the globe, and so he laid down a challenge: a world to win.

They're words which could equally have been spoken by the Apostle Paul. In our evening services and our mid-week meetings at the moment we are on the trail of that remarkable first century Jewish Christian as he engages in one of the earliest episodes of Christian missionary activity.

We can trace the journey on a slide: a fortnight ago we followed Paul's progress across from Antioch to Cyprus. This week he crosses the seas again from Cyprus north to modern day Turkey and then head 100 miles inland to Pisidian Antioch – Luke helpfully highlights that it was not the Antioch from which they had started out.

And from his preaching here it becomes very clear why Paul was a world Christian – there are some vital lessons to learn and they face us with the same challenge – **we** have a world to win.

Paul's teaching spans the two Sabbaths in which he was there in Pisidian Antioch and I want to read from verse 14b to introduce his teaching: ***On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."***

So what was the word of encouragement Paul chose to speak? Surprisingly to our ears it consisted mainly of a history lesson – but a history lesson with a difference.

Many today subscribe to the view that there is no pattern to history at all. It's a cynical view which has been called the Cleopatra's nose theory of history. I can see some people are puzzled, but maybe a question will help. What was it that ultimately led to Mark Anthony's downfall?

That was an event which was to have repercussions for the entire Roman world. And according to this theory of history it wasn't the battle of Actium which undid him; it was Cleopatra's nose. Anthony was infatuated by her beauty and in particular her nose – that was his downfall.

So the argument goes like this: there is no pattern to history, because if Cleopatra's nose had been a tiny bit longer, or if it had had a bump or a boil on it, everything would have been different: the rise and fall of nations depends on random things like that and history is governed by chance.

If you think that sounds like an obscure academic matter – it really isn't: because behind it lie some of the most important questions we can ever ask: where is humanity heading and where does my life personally fit in? And Paul's history lesson in a tiny Turkish synagogue back in the late 40s AD claims to address those questions head on. For him the central theme of history is not its

randomness, but its kingdomness. The Kingdom of God - a God who rules over all of mankind's affairs – is his over-arching world view.

(1)The preparation of God's Kingdom.

Chapter one of his history of the world we can call The Preparation of God's Kingdom. That's where he begins in verse 16, if you can follow it there:

¹⁶Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! ¹⁷The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers...

That's a one sentence summary of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in which after mankind's rebellion against God's rule, God chose one man, Abraham and made him first into a family, then a tribe, even a people within a few generations.

Paul continues in the middle of verse 17: **he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country;** one sentence to summarise the second book of the Bible: in which God showed he was his people's ruler, by rescuing the Israelites from the iron grip of Pharaoh.

The storyline in Paul's sermon notes whistles on at breakneck speed – because this is simply the Preparation of God's kingdom. So the following few verses cover the next four books of the Bible, up to the end of Joshua. Verse 18:

¹⁸he endured their conduct^[a] for about forty years in the desert, ¹⁹he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. ²⁰All this took about 450 years.

A long time to us – but to the God of eternity, a pinprick in the preparation of his kingdom.

The paragraphing in our Bibles helpfully highlights a turning point in the middle of verse 20: once his people are settled in the land, God places judges and then kings over his people: he delegates his kingdom to human leaders. So Paul reminds them:

"After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. ²¹Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. ²²After removing Saul, he made David their king. He 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.'

That takes us to the high water mark in the Old Testament. Under David, God's people are living in God's place under God's rule. He wasn't perfect, so the story doesn't end there; but the preparation of God's kingdom is well under way...

I wonder whether if you'd written a history of the world it would have any resemblance to Paul's first chapter.

Let me just mention a few striking features – for a start it is a **world** history: so his overview includes other nations – notably Egypt and the seven Canaanite nations that Israel drove out. That makes it clear that Israel's God is not just a tribal deity – he is the Lord of the nations.

Notice too the repeated hints of Israel's rebellion – most clearly when Paul talks of God enduring Israel's sin in the desert. They might be his chosen people, but their track record of shaking their fist in his face was a matter of public record – which of course anticipates the way this very chapter of Acts 13 ends – with the Jews shaking their fist in the face of God's spreading kingdom once again.

But perhaps the most striking thing about Paul's overview is his God-centred view of history – every event is recorded as God's doing. God chose our father, he made the people prosper, he led them out, he endured their conduct, he overthrew seven nations, he gave them the land, judges, a king... That's how the Bible views history – as an account of God's activity in the world.

We don't think like that at all: we might accept that it's a nice idea that God is involved in the world – but it's just a theory, surely. 'Never mind your theories,' people will say, 'just give us the facts'.

That's the way our newspapers are written and it's the way we write our history too – we strip away all interpretation.

We fail to see that we have built in an interpretation of history: namely that there isn't any interpretation. Just random, unconnected events.

Well – this is Paul's answer to the Cleopatra's nose view of history: **God** is in control of history; in charge of the nations, in charge even of human sin. His guiding hand is at work in the Preparation of the Kingdom. Maybe that is the one thing that someone here tonight needs to hold on to – that God is in control of the world and he is guiding your life as well. That is quite clear in Chapter one of Paul's history of time...

Chapter 2 of Paul's history we'll call the Proof of God's Kingdom. Let's pick up his sermon at verse 23 ***23"From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised.***

We won't read all the verses that follow but strikingly once we get to David, we pass over a millennium almost without comment until 2 women give birth to two babies: John the Baptist – who tells Israel that the long wait is over. And then a second baby was born – and with the arrival of Jesus Christ God's kingdom is present in person. So we move from the Preparation of God's Kingdom to the Proof of it.

(2) The Proof of God's Kingdom

So how did God's people respond: Well, they were true to their previous form according to verses 27-29

27The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. 28Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

Paul is emphatic that the people of Jerusalem should have known better than to reject Jesus – they knew he was innocent and they knew all the predictions about him in their Scriptures.

The irony is that the more violently they tried to get rid of Jesus, the more they were actually doing to prove that Jesus was God's appointed king, the Christ. Because at every point they were carrying out what was already written about him in the Old Testament: which is proof of God's kingdom

In communion tonight we are remembering a day which was more wicked than any other day in the history of the world. The hypocrisy of the high priests, the self-centred cowardice of Pilate, the pathetic fear of the disciples, the denial of Peter. And yet when man is at his worst in rebelling against God, he uses that evil to achieve the greatest good the world has even seen.

There is a hint of that in the word Paul uses to describe the cross in verse 29 – ‘the tree’. That is a throw-back to an obscure prophecy early on in the Bible, that anyone who hung on a tree died under the curse of God. It was predicted so long before, because the cross was to be the centrepiece of history, the moment when the innocent one, Jesus, bore the curse you and I deserve for our rebellion against God, to lift the curse from us. And that it was predicted is proof of God’s kingdom

The resurrection of course put it beyond doubt – Paul turns to that in verse 30

³⁰But God raised him from the dead, ³¹and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

I am going to pass over verse 32-37 where Paul shows how the resurrection was predicted by three Old Testament prophecies. But when God raised Jesus it demonstrated the proof of God’s kingdom unmistakably. Until that point it might have seemed that man’s sin had had the last word. Jesus is rejected – but God reverses that verdict by raising him.

It reminds me of that story I know I have told before from the day of the battle of Waterloo. One of the main look out posts to spot the signal ships in the English Channel was the roof of Winchester Cathedral. But a thick fog made the signal almost impossible to read: the message could just about be made out: WELLINGTON DEFEATED. And the depressing message got passed on from look out post to look out post. Until the fog lifted and revealed an extra word which changed everything: WELLINGTON DEFEATED NAPOLEON.

Jesus defeated? If you didn’t know the predictions of the Old Testament, it might look that way on Good Friday – but not on Easter Sunday: Jesus defeated sin and death – the Old Testament had predicted that as well – proof of God’s kingdom.

Which leaves us briefly to consider the last chapter of Paul’s history of the world: The Proclamation of God’s kingdom...

(3) The Proclamation of God’s Kingdom

³⁸"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

You get the flow of the argument thus far: The Old Testament gives us the Preparation of God’s kingdom; the ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection gives us the Proof of God’s kingdom – God’s great king, his Christ has come. All that remains is the proclamation of God’s kingdom – precisely what Paul was doing: ‘through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you’.

You’d think that this was good news. but there is a chilling note of warning in verses 40-41 ***⁴⁰Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:***

***⁴¹" 'Look, you scoffers,
wonder and perish,
for I am going to do something in your days***

***that you would never believe,
even if someone told you.*** ¹¹

Just as the first two chapters of Paul's history mention the rebellion of God's Old Testament people, so that theme continues in the third chapter, when God's kingdom is proclaimed to the nations. The Jews are jealous at free forgiveness being offered to the Gentiles and they oppose that message at every turn.

I'm not going to read the last section of the chapter, from verse 42 onwards because that is exactly what we see... The Gentiles accept the proclamation of the Kingdom, but the Jews fulfil yet another Old Testament prediction by rejecting it. Or rather it's the other way round, because a pattern emerges: Paul and his team reach a new town, they enter the synagogue first and preach to the Jews first and before long they are flung out of the synagogue window – so they take the message to the Gentiles. Because in this chapter of world history God is absolutely committed to one thing: the Proclamation of the Kingdom – to everyone who will accept it.

Which raises two questions for us as we close: Are we listening – if God is committed to the message of his kingdom being proclaimed then we need to be those who listen to it and receive that message. So have you taken that message to heart for yourself? Then secondly – are you speaking – once we have received the message it then becomes important that we join up with the workforce of those who are proclaiming that message to others. How else will God reach the world?

When Billy Graham first saw the pictures of earth taken from Space, I understand he said this: 'When I saw those photos of the planet, I just wanted to reach out and grab the world for God.' That's right – we have a world to win – and the way to do it is one by one...

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)