

Guided by the Holy Spirit

Acts 13 and 14

23rd May 2010

Encounter @ 9.00

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Story of travelling to the Netherlands with sat nav! To see our son, Peter. I'm not a big fan of sat nav, prefer to see my context rather than just the bit of the road around my immediate vicinity, so I prefer maps.

Fortunately, we did have a map book with us.

And I was following the sat nav advice as we received it as well as following on the map, because of course sat nav works abroad as well as here in the UK.

Bit surprised that the sat nav advised us to go south when we landed in Calais, in fact it took us through the town of Calais before that. All very interesting.

The road south was wonderful but I couldn't understand why the sat nav was saying it would be 7 hours or so before we'd arrive at our destination. Peter had said it had taken them only 3 hours or so on that side of the channel.

We stopped to check that the sat nav had been set up correctly, put the address in again, and were once again directed in what seemed a very strange angle on the map.

This went on for some time, we saw the wonderful French countryside and relaxed and decided to enjoy the trip. We came to Belgium, and still, we were taking turns that seemed quite odd when compared with the map.

We stopped again to set the whole thing up, put the address in again, and were once more sent on our way...in what seemed like a very strange choice of routes.

Eventually, beautiful countryside apart, we decided to trust common sense; we switched off the sat nav, got on a main highway and were there in hardly any time at all.

Not sure when we realised what had happened, but it emerged that when we had crossed the channel and reset the sat nav, the fundamental almost secret settings had somehow come adrift and the selection marked 'avoid the main highways' had been set as our basic choice.

We had avoided the main highways and in the process enjoyed a very scenic journey indeed. Not to be recommended if fuel and time are issues.

These two chapters in Acts tell us about Paul's first missionary journey. He didn't have sat nav...not as we know it anyway. But he did have the guidance of the HS, which it turns out is far better. Now, these two chapters are long and involved so if you are still awake and aware, well done. I'm going to draw out some pointers from these chapters – not the usual 3 point Baptist sermon today...we are going to have 7 points, briefly and then I want to underline a phrase that keeps popping up in these passages.

These are points that we might use to reconfigure our spiritual sat nav, so that we are guided by the HS.

The first point is the basic and fundamental one of **adjusting our settings so we focus on God.**

The story begins at Antioch where Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul were worshipping and fasting. Other translations say they were ministering to the Lord and fasting.

They were focused on God, ministering to him. How do we minister to the Lord? It's a strange concept because it's not as if God needs anything from us. Not our service or praise or prayers. God is whole and needs no other of his creations to make him complete. And yet...he chooses to invite us to be in partnership with Him. What an amazing privilege that is.

Back in the days when I was a very young Xian...

I became a Xian along with two other friends and we were in my sitting room, praying together. it was one of those times when everything becomes still. We had the patio doors open and it was as if Jesus had stepped from the garden into our room and into our prayers. I had a picture of Jesus sat among us, and we were washing his feet. When I told

my friends this, one of them looked at the other and said, 'mmm that's not right is it, Jesus would be washing our feet.'

I didn't think too much about it being right or not at the time, but the memory of that picture has never left me. That was my way of ministering to the Lord.

Another time in prayer, I imagined picking my favourite flowers to give the Lord a bouquet...I love flowers and I'm sure God loves them too as he loves all that he's made, so it seemed right to give him back some of my favourites (in my imagination). Not that he needs them but just to delight him as we are delighted when we receive flowers.

So the first step in guidance on our journey is to adjust our settings to focus on God.

The second is to **adjust our settings so we become aware of others**, the people around us on our journey.

The story of the 1st missionary journey continues after the ministry to the Lord and the fasting with this awareness. Certain people – Barnabas and Paul are chosen for the journey and given directions.

As those people pray certain ones are raised up and commissioned.

But if that happens for the good, there is also an awareness of the bad in others. So we might say this adjustment is all about discernment.

On the first destination of the journey, Paul and Barnabas stop at Cyprus. There they come across the Jewish sorcerer and false prophet Bar-Jesus (Elymus).

Immediately, Paul discerns that this man is perverting the way of the Lord, and just as he is blinding others to the true way by preaching a different way, so Paul obscures his vision, he is overcome with darkness and rendered blind for a while.

The scene then moves to Antioch. Not back to the Antioch in Syria where they had come from, but on to another Antioch in Pisidia. Here, Paul preaches one of his amazing sermons and we come across another key adjustment for our journey:

Know your story, and know that it is part of a bigger story.

This is a case of having a map to show the big picture *and* a sat nav to show and tell the fine tuning and detail of turning this way and that.

Paul rehearses the story over and over again. In his sermons he tells the story of Jesus Christ, he also tells the bigger story of God's dealings with

his people right back to the first patriarchs. And he shows how the two fit together.

This is important for our lives as the story continues with our lives and all subsequent generations. The concerns we have about today will take their place in the bigger story. And we need never to lose sight of that. It is both a positive and a negative for our perspective. Nothing that happens today will be forgotten or lost, all of our thoughts and actions have importance; but nothing that happens today will skew the outcome of the bigger picture either.

I was given a book the other day...I can't think why...called 'Don't Sweat the Small Stuff' – sub-title 'and it's all small stuff.'

The point it is making is that in the grand scheme of things – in the bigger picture – much of what we whittle away about and get anxious about, is really not that big a deal.

God,

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Our stories are contained within a bigger story; we do need to play our part but we are part of the whole.

4th point: **know that the story can grow.**

Persecution comes, channels of communication break down, but all is not lost; new doors open. The apostles take the big story and offer it to the Gentiles. And both Gentiles and the apostles are blessed...filled again with the HS.

Again, persecution comes and we move on into the account from chptr 14, in Iconium, a man is healed. He is someone who has never walked; he is commanded to stand up straight, and he does.

Here, we note our 5th point: **know that God is in every person.**

I'm going to come back to that phrase, standing up straight in just a moment.

For now, we move on to the 6th point: **know yourself, know who you are.**

Here is an incredible swing of the pendulum. Paul and Barnabas had been undesirables in one town after another, in one country after another. Suddenly, they are heralded as gods.

We might think how alluring that must have been after all the persecution, but they had a right view of themselves and assured the crowd they were just ordinary people too.

Have you heard this joke?

What's the difference between God and a consultant?

God doesn't think he's a consultant.

We might think we know a thing or two...we know we're not God, but we might be occasionally thinking we are not so bad as that one or that one....

Or

We might think we know nothing...we may even call ourselves stupid at times, or allow or even come to agree with others when they call us stupid.

But a right view of ourselves is important. We are children of God, we are called, chosen. But we are also made from dust, even if it is stardust, and to dust we will return.

Finally, notice after more persecution chases our two heroes from Lystra, and then into Derbe, and then out of Derbe...where do they go? Right back the way they had come....

Leading us to our final point: **keep practising/return to check your basic settings.**

The whole journey goes like this:

Paul and Barnabas go from Antioch in Syria to Paphos in Cyprus, on to Antioch in Pisidia, on to Iconium, then to Lystra and finally to Derbe. And then they turn around and more or less retrace their steps. They go back from Derbe to Lystra, then to Iconium, then to Antioch in Pisidia. The only place they do leave out on the return journey is Cyprus.

Isn't this a picture of our lives? Do you notice how each one of us tends to revisit the same issue or problem or weakness? We come across the same kinds of personalities in our lives. We may leave one job because we have issues with a certain person only to find that person's qualities (the ones with which we have much difficulty) are alive and well within another person we have to work alongside in our new job.

I am often teaching and talking about grief; and one pic I use again and again, because it makes sense in my life and my grief is the pic of a mountain. The mountain is our journey through life; the road winds

around and around the mountain. Grief is like a crevasse or scar down the mountain-side, and on our journey we revisit this scar, the same scar only we come across it at different points on our journey.

This scar I interpret as grief could also be for you whatever it is that you notice you keep coming up against: those irritating qualities in others, the trouble or temptation that crops up from time to time for you. Notice it and attend to the crevasse, **keep practising your life; keep checking your basic settings** not with the intention of repeating mistakes or lessons already learned, but with the assurance that we have a God of the 2nd chance (actually 2nd, 3rd, 4th, infinite number..chance)

So there we have our 7 points:

adjusting our settings so we focus on God.

adjust our settings so we become aware of others

Know your story as part of a bigger story

know that the story can grow.

know that God is in every person.

know yourself, know who you are.

keep practising/check your basic settings

those 3 point I want to underline all contain one phrase and that is 'the straight paths of the Lord'

we see it three times: Bar- Jesus is perverting or confusing the straight paths of the Lord

Paul in his sermon is preaching about the straight paths of the Lord 'joining up the dots'

And in Paul healing the lame man, he commands him to stand up straight.

I want to tie all these threads together to say that the Lord's ways are direct, simple and straightforward. God is Love what more simple a message could we have? His burdens are light, apparently.

In Psalms 'all his ways are fragrant with his loving kindness and his truth.'

Certainly, in our lives we often don't experience this simple directness, this straightforwardness for which we were designed.

We confuse things, we attach rules and regulations and expectations to everything that is basic. We complicate our lives.

And yet when we look back we may see with hindsight that the path was more direct than we realised. We can 'join up the dots' in our own lives and see things more straightforwardly.

This Pentecost, perhaps we can make a promise to ourselves, to each other and to God to seek out his straight paths, to become more focused on directness and less concerned with clutter.

Have you heard of this acronym?

KISS keep it simple, stupid.

I don't like that word, 'stupid' so lets change the acronym to

KISS keep it simply straightforward.

And a final prayer: (from A Blessing to Follow, by Tom Gordon)

God of all new beginnings,

thank you for the promise of the journey.

God of familiar landmarks,

thank you for helpful signposts along the way.

God of real companionship,

thank you for stories of reassurance and love.

God of all the travellers,

help us to be patient with those who still make mistakes.

God of saintly wisdom,

help us learn from those who are patient with us.

God of the journey's twists and turns,

help us to trust your strength when we are scared.

God of our weariness,

give us what we need to keep on going.

God of our anticipation,

give us the excitement of reaching the journey's end.

God of all our endings,

give us the hope we need at the end of the beginning.

God of all new beginnings,

thank you for the promise of beginning again.