**Acts 13:1-12 God’s guidance for the church.**

It has been said that the reason the Israelites wandered lost in the wilderness for forty years, was because even in biblical times men would not stop to ask directions.

Then again…I heard about a blonde and a brunette who leapt off a multi-story building at the same time. Interestingly, the brunette hit the ground first. Why, you ask? Because the blonde had to ask directions on the way down.

A Swiss guy, looking for directions, pulls up at a bus stop where two Australians are waiting. "Entschuldigen Sie mich bitte, aber sprechen Sie Deutch? The two Aussies just stare at him.  
  
"Excusez-moi, parlez vous Francais?" he tries. The two continue to stare. "Parli Italiano?" No response. "Hablan Espanol?" Still nothing.  
  
The Swiss guy drives off, disgusted. The first Aussie turns to the second and says, "Y'know, maybe we should learn a foreign language."  
  
"Nah,” says the other. "That guy knew four languages, and it didn't do him any good."

Knowing where you’re going – having the right directions - is a critical component of arriving at your destination. And it’s just as critical for us as God’s people to be sure of our direction, if we are to be the church he has called us to be.

You’ll remember at the end of Matthew, the disciples received a commission from Jesus to “go and make disciples of all nations.”

How easy would that have been?

We think nothing of travelling the world these days. It’s not difficult at all. Travel agents take care of all the arrangements, airline porters take care of the luggage, taxi drivers ferry us from point A to point B. It might be tiring, but really, it’s not all that difficult.

But in Jesus’ day, travel was a major undertaking. The most common way to get where you wanted to go was to walk – or take a donkey. People rarely travelled outside their home town. There were no maps to speak of, no GPS, no motels or caravan parks. It was dangerous to travel on open roads as there was always the danger of being mugged!

So the commission the disciples were given wasn’t as easy as it sounds, was it? How did they know what to do, in the face of a potentially dangerous commission; how did they know where to go and how to get there?

We’ll find some answers as we take a brief tour through the book of Acts this morning, looking particularly at chapter 13, which was our New Testament reading.

By the time we reach Acts 13, a lot had happened in the early church. The Holy Spirit had arrived with signs and wonders following the apostles as they preached about Jesus. The Gentiles had been welcomed into the church. Persecution had begun. Steven had been martyred and the believers scattered. In all of this, what the early Christians had learned, beyond any shadow of doubt, was that God speaks, God guides and God empowers!

*God speaks*

The early Christians knew that God *spoke*. The centuries of silence from God had ended with the coming of John the Baptist. Now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the believers began to hear God speak to *them*.

You’ll remember that Holy Spirit spoke to both Cornelius and Peter in a dream – which was the beginning of the Gentile inclusion in the church.

Jesus spoke to Paul in no uncertain terms, on the Damascus Rd, as he was knocked from his horse by a blinding light and a voice from heaven! Paul became God’s missionary to the Gentiles.

Phillip was told simply to go to a particular place at a particular time, where he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch, whom he led to faith in Jesus. Scholars believe that this encounter with the eunuch resulted in the Christian message being introduced to North Africa.

*God guides*

As God speaks, he not only imparts truth, he guides and directs us. In the reading this morning, we have an example of God guiding the early believers.

*Prophecy*

As they were worshipping God together on this occasion, they became conscious of clear direction from the Holy Spirit. We read in verse 2, “While they were worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

Then again in v4, we read, “The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and then sailed to Cyprus.”

It’s an intriguing passage, because we’re not given the all the details of how the Holy Spirit communicated with them.

Though it’s not spelled out, I suspect that the guidance was given to the apostles through messages the Holy Spirit imparted to ‘the prophets’, who played an important part in the leadership of the early church.

These prophets weren’t people who predicted future; rather they were people who heard clearly from God, and proclaimed his message. Prophecy in this sense was what the prophet Joel predicted would be poured out on God people with the coming of the Holy Spirit. “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.”

The context of this particular story is found in v1 – “In the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers” - and then we have the names - Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul. The names don’t mean a lot to us (though we do know about Saul!) However, they would have been quite important to the first readers of the story of Acts, as these names would have also carried the weight of these people’s reputations. They were the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch – people in whom the church had confidence.

So in this passage, it seems that *guidance was provided for the church at Antioch through the ‘prophets.’*

*Dreams & Visions*

As we continue through the book of Acts, we find other ways that God guided the church. In chapter 16, Paul finds himself compelled to go to Macedonia. That actually hadn’t been his plan. He really wanted to go to Asia. But we read in v6, that he was ‘forbidden’ by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. Then in v9 we read that Paul had a *vision* during the night, in which he saw a man from Macedonia begging him to go there and help them.

In this particular story, as in the story of Peter & Cornelius, we see that *God guided his people through the means of dreams and visions.*

*Our natural intellect & common sense*

In v 17, we see another side of God’s guidance – that of using our God-given intellect & common sense. Paul, on the run from persecution, found himself in Athens, waiting for his co-workers Silas and Timothy to join him. With time on his hands, and rather appalled at the number of idols he saw there, Paul wandered up to the synagogue and we read that he ‘reasoned in the Synagogue with the Jews and God fearing Greeks.’ Then later, he got into further discussion with the local philosophers. Spotting an idol dedicated ‘to an unknown God’, Paul used that to lead into sharing the Christian message with them.

There’s no mention of specific guidance from the Holy Spirit in this passage, but as Paul uses his *God-given intellect and common sense,* we see the Holy Spirit take this situation and use it to bring yet more people to faith in Christ!

*Circumstances*

Lastly – for this morning anyway – we find that another way Paul was guided was through *circumstances* – the happenings of life that he had no control over.

Paul was being taken from Crete to Italy by boat, to appear before the emperor in Rome. Though he had a gut feeling (from the Holy Spirit no doubt) that the journey would be disastrous, the captain and crew sailed anyway, and they ended up being shipwrecked by a storm!

Not the most pleasant of experiences. But it did land Paul in Malta – a place he would not otherwise have gone to share the Gospel – and as a result of their arriving on the Island, God healed half the island’s inhabitants, and brought them to faith in Christ. Amazing!

So often, when awful things happen to us, we can feel so beaten up by the experience, that we forget that God can use even the darkest times to bring about blessing, for us, and for others.

*The early Christians also learned that God empowers*

As the early Christians prayed, heard God’s voice and stepped out in faith, time and again they experienced the awe-inspiring *power* of the Holy Spirit at work.

Peter experienced God’s empowering on the day of Pentecost, as the Spirit filled his mouth with the message that brought more than three thousand people to faith in Christ that day! Not bad for a normally inarticulate fisherman! Then a little while later, Peter & John received supernatural insight that Jesus would heal the crippled beggar at the temple gate.

Time and again, the apostles were given the words to say in tricky circumstances. Even Stephen, as he faced death, preached a powerful sermon.

The disciples preached throughout the known world; they healed people, they cast out demons, and even raised the dead!

In 15 minutes I can barely scratched the surface of the stories in the book of Acts. If you’ve never sat down and read it from cover to cover, let me recommend it! - Particularly using a translation such as the Good News or Message Bible. It will encourage you no end in your walk with God.

What we learn from the book of Acts, as I said at the beginning, is that God speaks, God guides and God empowers his people. And as we saw in the passage from chapter 13 this morning, God so often speaks to his people while they are engaged in prayer.

Yesterday a group of us gathered at the Rectory for prayer and discussion, to seek the mind of God as to how we can share his Good News more effectively in our community.

The key thing we heard from the Holy Spirit yesterday was about the importance of prayer. Many other flashes of inspiration also began to surface, which we will explore along with other insights, in due course. But what we strongly felt that God was saying that we needed to prioritise the place of prayer in the life of our church if we are serious about seeing God move in us and through us.

And so to that end, we have decided to meet weekly to pray for our church; for our existing ministries, and for new places that God might want to take us. It will be Thursdays from 8.30 am to 9.30 am in the Noble room. For those who’d like to be part of this but who can’t make it at that time – please pray with us from home.

We’re committed to fine-tuning our hearing, so that we too, like the believers in the book of Acts, will know God’s voice, his guidance and his empowering.

Please join us.

Let’s pray.