

'Source and Streams'

- From Nazareth to the nations (30-300 CE)

JORDAN TO JERUSALEM

Voice in the wilderness

The prophetic voice, silent for so long, suddenly thundered in proclamation again on the banks of the river Jordan in the person of John 'the baptiser'. His cry was, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (Mk 1:2) This phrase linked with John's personal style and dress spoke eloquently. It was the focus of all the prophetic messages about the 'end times', the distilling of all the hopes for both judgment and salvation; John epitomised the prophetic ideal, he was in the model of Elijah, who was clearly expected to appear before the Messiah came (Mal 4:5 cf Mt 11:14). For those with eyes to see, the stage was set.

John's mission was that of a 'herald', to prepare the way for the Messiah. The essence of John's message was 'repentance' (Gk *metanoia*), that 'change of mind' that brings about a change of life. This choice was demonstrated by the act of baptism marking a break with the past and embracing a new future.¹ John's ministry was to focus attention so that those who would could see the Messiah as he appeared. But of course God is always taking us by surprise, and this moment was no exception.

'The man Christ Jesus' ²

What can one say about the most influential life ever lived upon this earth? That life which has changed more lives and whose influence has spread further geographically than any other known to humankind. That life which, in the last century and a half alone, 'has been more influential in the life of the human race than at any previous time ... that is more deeply rooted among more peoples than any other faith has ever been'.³

The Jews expected their Messiah to be a military conqueror, destroying their enemies and ruling the nations with God's perfect justice. The one who came, Christians have come to believe and understand, was in fact God in human form. While he fulfilled all the prophetic promises about him, he did so in such a manner that divine power was cloaked by gentleness and able to move among the people of his time incognito. Wherever he went the 'life' and 'authority' that exuded from him drew people and yet no one could fully comprehend whom he was.

Jesus was 'the logos become a human being' (cf Jn 1:14); that creative Word of God, divine wisdom, the reason that pervades all things, God himself in human form, 'pitching his tent' like a fellow traveller amid the nomadic camp of humanity. He was the '*shekinah*' glory brought into focus, a graphic expression of exactly what God was like.

¹ For much more detail on the background to John's baptism, Jesus' baptism and a New Testament understanding of Christian baptism see Workshop notes 'Living Community: Water of Life' p 37-61

² 1Timothy 2:5

³ Attributed to Kenneth Latourette



The historical details of Jesus' life are fragmentary. Possibly born around 5 BC towards the end of the life of Herod the Great, according to the tradition in the Gospels, in the Judean town of Bethlehem; then growing up as a carpenter-builder in Nazareth in Galilee.

Following his baptism by John around 27 CE he began an itinerant ministry, which according to the Synoptics may have been for perhaps 18-months, but according to John's Gospel possibly lasted some three years.

According to the Gospels, in Jesus the 'kingdom of God' broke into time and space. Activity that was characteristic of the 'end times' began to happen there and then in the Palestine of his day. Eschatology began to be realised 'now' but 'not yet' fully consummated; paradoxically 'the day of the Lord' was both present and yet still future in its consummation. The Jesus' traditions stress that the 'words' of Jesus proclaim the presence of God's kingdom, 'the kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Lk 17:21). They parallel that emphasising the 'works' of Jesus demonstrating the power of God's kingdom. The 'words' interpret the 'works' and the 'works' illustrate the 'words'. The Messiah has come! The unique impact of Jesus' public ministry is captured in Peter's words to Cornelius:

'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with Holy Spirit and with power;
... he went about doing good and healing
... for God was with him'
(Acts 10:38)

'Impossible that death should hold him'

The style of the Gospel narrative makes it quite clear that the climax of Jesus' ministry took place in the city of Jerusalem, sometime between 30-33 CE. The essence of the kingdom was bound up totally in the person of Jesus, 'God's anointed one'. The 'divine moment' in history was the single event of his birth, dynamic life, sacrificial death as the 'suffering servant', and his resurrection as the warrior hero over death itself. Followed by the out-pouring of God's spirit at Pentecost, which released the life of God himself into the world bringing to birth a messianic community who would set the world on fire by bringing in the completeness of the rule of God.

Here is a synthesis of the 'Son of man' (cf Dan 7) and the 'Suffering Servant' (cf Isa 53) ideas, climaxing in Jesus' resurrection:

'This man,
handed over to you according to the definite plan
and foreknowledge of God,
you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.
But God raised him up, having freed him from death,
because it was impossible for him to be held by its power.'
(Acts 2;23-24)

'Proclaim to the whole creation'

Jesus' parting words to his disciples was the command to bring the message of the kingdom of God and its dynamic rule, not only to the lives of all peoples everywhere, but also to the whole creation (Mk 16:15). Jesus told them:



“... you will receive power , when the Holy Spirit as come upon you:
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria
and to the ends of the earth”
(Acts 1:8)

It is the fulfilment of this command that will occupy our attention for the rest of our times together and should be the consuming passion of our lives also.

JUDEA TO ANTIOCH

Jerusalem and Judea

The small band of disciples who followed or responded to Jesus during his ministry was the church in embryo; the day of Pentecost was their moment of birth, and the womb from which they leapt was that of Judaism.

With Jesus being the fulfilment of the Hebrew faith it is no surprise that the first Christian community came into being in Jerusalem, the national and spiritual epicentre of Israel. Here the crucifixion, resurrection and pentecostal experience had taken place. Here all the Jews of the scattered *diaspora* looked for God to work, and to which they had travelled at festival times, when they were able, from the four corners of the Roman empire and beyond.

The first Christians were not called by that name. They were viewed simply as an extremist group within Judaism at the beginning, messianic Jews for whom ‘Jesus was the Messiah’. They continued to follow the traditions of their Hebrew faith, but with a real rejoicing at their fulfilment and with a dynamic community life brought about by the life of the Spirit.

This initial community had Peter as its chief spokesperson and it shaped its life on the teaching that he and the other apostles brought. As more leadership and administration was needed other godly people were appointed, like Stephen, Philip and finally James (probably the half-brother of Jesus) about whom there are strong traditions of godliness.

The community soon spread out into the Judean countryside and as Peter became increasingly involved in missionary endeavour elsewhere so James [the brother of Jesus] took over leadership of the Judean community until his martyrdom. The significance of this initial group is often forgotten; not only was it looked to with deep affection and considerable honour, until Jerusalem was laid waste in 70 CE. At the time, just prior to Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem, the Judean church numbered tens of thousands.

Samaria and Antioch

Persecution and the martyrdom of Stephen gave sudden momentum to the spread of the gospel and the expansion of the Christian community. Never is it more clearly seen that the church is a ‘people movement’. Escaping for their lives, now anonymous Christians scattered everywhere but proclaiming Jesus as ‘the Messiah’ at every opportunity.



Philip saw a tremendous response in Samaria, and was also used to spread the gospel into Ethiopia by means of a changed life of a 'God-fearing' court official (Acts 8:26-39). We see the ancient enmity between Jew and Samaritan resolved in Christ. John is used to call down the fire of the Holy Spirit upon them rather than the fire of judgment he desired some time before (cf Lk 9:54; Acts 8:14-17).

Other, now unknown, Christians went further north to Antioch in Syria, the third major city of the Roman Empire. Here they included Gentiles too among those whom Jesus was preached, and with outstanding success. In breaking new ground an apostolic delegation investigated. Barnabas' response speaks volumes about the quality of what was happening, 'he saw the grace of God and was glad' (cf Acts 11:22-23). So much so in fact that it became his home church. It was here that the messianic community were first called 'Christians' ('little messiahs'). And this was the springboard from which the gospel spread in Asia and Europe. It was also to be a major Christian centre with its theological school and particular style of theology.

TARSUS TO ROME

Paul and the Gentiles

It is the encounter of a zealous Jewish rabbi called Saul (later known by his Roman name 'Paul'), with what he saw as a heretical Nazarene sect that was to dramatically influence the continuing story of the Christian community.

We meet Saul standing in zealous agreement with Stephen's execution (Acts 7:58). In that moment he was already perfectly prepared by God's hand to serve as one of his major agents in the building of the very community he was trying to destroy. He perfectly fitted the two worlds in which the gospel was being born.

Paul was a Jew. 'Hebrew of the Hebrews' (of full Hebraic tradition uncorrupted by Greek influence), a Pharisee in attitude to the law, with rabbinic training in the best school of the day, zealous in every way for his ancestral faith.

Yet his birth in Tarsus gave Paul Roman citizenship, a prized possession; he spoke Greek and was well familiar with their literature and ideas. He was a 'tent maker', which enabled him to support himself in almost any situation.

Struck down by the finger of God on the road to Damascus, orientated in the obscurity of the Arabian desert, confirmed in his message by the apostles in Jerusalem, urged forward in his ministry by the encouraging friendship of Barnabas, Paul became a pioneer for the gospel in Cyprus, Asia Minor and Greece and during years of later imprisonment placed in writing the essence of his message and its practical out-working in letters to churches that he had planted in various places.

Paul's missionary technique was brilliant. He concentrated his attention on the major cities of the area. Knowing that once the Christian community was established in an urban centre the message would naturally spread into the countryside through the processes of travel and trade.



He began by going to the Jewish community in the synagogue knowing he would initially be accepted and stayed until he was thrown out. There was always at least a nucleus of 'God-fearers' who received his message and with them the Christian community was begun.

His whole life was marked by hardship and self-sacrifice and probably ended in martyrdom on the Appian Way, but the fruit of it is outstanding if not incalculable, and his testimony inspired multitudes in their walk with God.

The genius of Paul was his ability to see the essence of the gospel within the Jewish context and apply it to the wider Gentile world as an experience of radical spiritual freedom. He has well been described as 'the apostle of the free spirit'.⁴ Paul does more than anyone else in the first century to emphasize the equality of Jew and Gentile in the one Body of Christ and freedom of them both from the Torah through membership in the new covenant community.

The words of God to Ananias, the Christian leader in Damascus who was commanded to pray for Saul in his blindness, at the outset of his faith, encapsulate perfectly the rest of his life and his ministry:

Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen
to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;
I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'
(Acts 9:15-16)

Mission and expansion

We know most about Paul because of Luke's history and through his many letters but he was not the only missionary, Peter, Apollos, in fact all the apostles seem to have been and many more. Some were self-supporting and churches supported some. Through these the great expansion on the first century took place

Christianity increasingly moved out from Judaism, being seen as quite different from that faith in its message. It used *koine* Greek ('common' or 'people's Greek') as its language and the LXX as its Bible.

Those saved at Pentecost were from all corners of the Roman Empire and many must have returned home with the message. It is suggested that by the autumn after the crucifixion, which was in the springtime, Jesus was being preached as 'Christ' in Rome,⁵ so why not elsewhere.

The Christian community in the first century was predominantly urban, moving along the trade routes from city to city, prominent feature of the Roman empire, from there they spread into the surrounding towns and then took up deep root in the countryside.

⁴ See FF Bruce *'Paul – Apostle of the Free Spirit'* Patternoster 1980 (2nd Rev edition)

⁵ See F.J. Foakes-Jackson *'History of the Christian Church to AD 461'* Cambridge 1905



EMPIRE AND BEYOND

Deepening impact

We know even less about the full extent of the spread of the gospel in the second and third centuries of the church, than we do about the first century! What is clear is that there was rapid growth, so that by the year 200 CE Christians were found in every province of the empire and beyond even Mesopotamia. In the third century it gathered even greater momentum, as Rome's sickness became increasingly obvious. By the close of the third century the church was strongest in the east of the empire, especially Asia Minor, though the church in Rome was gaining increasing authority.

Typical of church growth in the third century was the slightly stylised story of Gregory 'the wonder worker' who ministered in Pontus in Asia Minor. It is said, 'when he began there were only 17 Christians but when he finished, 30 years later, there were only 17 pagans!'

- Not only was the church in Rome strong, but by the middle of the third century there was said to be over 100 bishops in Italy; stronger in the south than in the north.
- The second city of the empire, Alexandria, not only had a strong church but also an important theological school in which men like Clement and Origen taught and stimulated Christian thought.
- The North African capital of Carthage, so vital to the Roman economy, was another Christian stronghold, with men like Tertullian and Cyprian adding their impact upon theological thought.
- Early in the third century saw the church firmly established in the south of Spain; the early leadership could have been better but it survived the Muslim invasions of the eighth century better than North Africa.
- Companions of Paul may well have planted the first church in Gaul (France); it was certainly strong by the second century. Lyons and Vienna suffered terrible early persecution, which was a witness to all. Shortly after, Irenaeus, an important early thinker also worked there. From there traders and merchants certainly took the gospel into Britain.

The strength of the Christian community by the end of the third century has been variously estimated as being at least 5 to 10 percent of the population. Whatever the exact number, Tertullian's words are true:

"We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all the places that belong to you - cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges, military camps themselves, tribes, town councils, the palace, the Senate, the market place; - we have left you nothing but your temples!"

Beyond the empire

Just as trade spilt over the boundaries of the empire so did the gospel:

- Trade routes from Syria (Antioch and Damascus) travelled to Mesopotamia where by early in the third century there were 20 bishops whose authority reached as far north as the Caspian Sea and south to the Persian Gulf;



- In Armenia, on the slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, the buffer state between Rome and Persia saw mass conversions late in the third century led by the royal family; it became the first nation where its leaders turned in a Christian direction;
- The north and eastern coasts of the Black Sea had established Christian communities by the end of the third century;
- The same period saw Christians in Arabia, east and especially in the south (Yemen) as a result of commercial activity with Alexandria;
- Tradition says that by the late second century the gospel been established in India by apostle Thomas; it probably travelled along the trade routes and 'oases' of Hellenism first established by Alexander the Great.

Not many wise

What were the social origins of the first Christians? The simple answer is that we cannot be certain! They were primarily 'urban' and initially made up of Jews, and 'God-fearing' Gentiles interested in Judaism. The majority were Greek speakers from the cities of Hellenism but later there were many Syriac speaking Mesopotamians.

There is some evidence that large numbers of the early Christians were among the 'urban depressed', slaves and free-men, 'a social movement of the under privileged', as Paul said, "not many wise, mighty, noble.. are called". A third century attack on Christians by Celsus says that as a faith, "it had its chief hold among the ignorant".

However, this is not the whole story. Even in the first century men and women of social prominence became Christians, wealth and education proving no stumbling block. The Jerusalem community had those with excess wealth that was used to help the poor. In the early period some prominent Romans became Christians. The proportion between the socially prominent and the poor in the Church was probably much the same as it was in the empire as a whole, which would mean a predominance of the uneducated. But this does not mean that the Christian community was simply and directly a poor persons movement, though they were often those who most readily 'received the word gladly'.

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