

Called to Opportunity and Opposition

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Date: 10 September 2017

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[0 : 00] Last month in Tokyo, there was an exhibition. It was an exhibition that was put on for anybody who worked in, if I can use the phrase, the funeral industry.

And at the exhibition, there was a particular thing that was launched. In Japan, apparently there is a shortage of human resources when it comes to people who can lead funerals.

And so, a new robot has been designed. Hey, can we have a picture, please? This is Pepper, the robot, principally designed to lead Buddhist funerals, but I guess, bearing in mind he's a robot, you can program him to do whatever you want.

But Pepper hasn't actually been hired yet to preside, funnily enough. But there it is. Watch this space. Clive, I was just wondering if we could get them to chair meetings for us and attend synods and stuff like that.

In the reading that we had this morning, I want to focus in on one particular phrase that they said, which is what Paul and Barnabas, this comes from the book of Acts, which tells the story of the early church. So Jesus has been among his disciples, he's died, he's come back to life, he's gone back to heaven.

[1 : 18] He sends his Holy Spirit and we see the church in action at this time. And as this happens in this story, we see a healing take place.

We see people are healed and the crowds begin to go around because they can't believe that someone has been healed miraculously. And they go nuts over it. And to the extent that they start actually bowing down to Paul and Barnabas, who have prayed just as this healing has happened. And they respond to this saying, no, look, we too are human. We're human. Now, robots didn't exist in those days, so they're not trying to say we're not robots.

They're saying we're not divine. But yet, the point is, is that sometimes we can think that, you know, that the stories we read of in the scriptures that are mind-blowing, whether it's people healed or whatever it may be, these extraordinary signs and wonders of God, and they can be so removed from our own human experience, we can think, where's the humanity in this?

These can't be human beings. These people must be robots, or must be divine themselves, but there's something that isn't human in it.

[2 : 48] What I actually love about not just this story, and not just the whole of the book of Acts, which tells the story of the earliest Christians, but the whole of scripture is that it actually talks, the stories that are there are stories about real human beings who experience an extraordinary God.

And so they were made of flesh. They weren't robots. They weren't themselves divine. They were ordinary people like you and me, but experienced extraordinary things.

They experienced the mix of the good and the bad and the ugly. stories of real people that experience both joy and suffering, who experience opportunity and opposition, who experience blessing and sorrow.

And in just these few verses, we see people who are, on the one hand, coming to faith, and it's really exciting, and the early church is growing, and yet at the same time we hear of people who start to resent that and begin to plot against the early Christians.

We see stories of healing and miracles, and yet we also see them trying to stone Paul to death. And that theme, that juxtaposition of the amazingly exciting and the horrific going hand in hand is something that runs right through the Bible, and we see it compacted in these few verses that we have read to us this morning.

[4 : 25] Now, whatever our own lives might look like, I think we can relate to all of that by the reality, the simple but very, very great reality, that life is a mix of the good and the bad.

Whatever we have going on in our lives right now, whatever you have going on in your life right now, my guess is that it's going to be a mix of good stuff and the not so good.

Sure, we might have a particular day, a week or a month or even a year, that is absolutely awful, where everything seems to be going wrong. On the other hand, we might be having a really good day. But most of the time, most of life is a bit of a mix of the good and the not good.

And that is where this reading can really speak to us. Because we can ask ourselves the question, how was it then that these two people, Paul and Barnabas, dealt with that reality of the good and the ugly going on at the same time?

And I think the hint lies in the verse, which wasn't read to us, but lies at the very end of the chapter, right before this story from the book of Acts, where we're told simply that the disciples, that is the followers of Jesus, were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 45] See, the reason why I think that is the insight, it's how they actually went through life and lived life like this, is because for them, they knew where their focus was. Even though there was the mix of the good and the painful in their lives, they knew where their focus needed to be.

There's a saying, a phrase, and I don't know who first came up with it, but it's been around a few years, and it goes like this, glance at your problems, but gaze upon God.

Glance at your problems, but gaze on God. And I think that's what we find in Paul and Barnabas and those early followers of Jesus. That is what they did, and that is how they survived.

That is not only how they survived, but how they flourished, because they knew that that is the way to deal with the mix of the good and the not so good in life. Glance at your problems, but gaze upon God.

Let's just think about what that might mean. When you're driving a car, if you're sat behind the wheel, and you're going along the road, my guess is, you're going to be gazing through the windscreen.

[6 : 57] Now, when I say gaze, I don't mean in a trance. I mean gazing as in focused. You're going to be looking at what's going on, hopefully immediately in front of you. You're also going to be, hopefully, looking ahead at what's further ahead of you.

That's what I mean by gazing. But also, you're going to be taking the occasional glance in your mirrors, either side and in your rear view mirror. What would happen if you did it the other way around?

In other words, your gaze was in your mirrors, and you took the occasional glance in front. And yet, that's exactly what happens, I think, with us in the way we live our lives when it comes to the relationship between the mess and the problems that we have, and we all have it going on in our lives, and God.

That we instinctively gaze upon what's going wrong and take the occasional glance at God. You might even send up the occasional prayer.

These people in Scripture, in the Bible, Paul, Barnabas, and all the rest, they were ordinary human beings, but they grasped the importance of getting it the other way around.

[8 : 19] To glance at your problems, but to gaze upon God. Now, let's see what that doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean burying your head in the sand. It doesn't mean denying the reality of problems. It just means the way in which we allow ourselves to become preoccupied.

A few years ago, when I used to live in Devon, I was going to buy a laptop one day, I went into this shop, and a sales assistant came over and asked what I was looking for.

We got about a minute or so into a conversation, and his phone rang, and he said to me, sorry, do you mind if I just take that? Fair enough.

And he said, sorry, it's just that I'm trying to sell my car right now, and I think this could be an important call. And off he went. Now, call me old-fashioned, but my understanding of a sales assistant in a shop is that their primary purpose, their role, is to sell the stuff that is in the shop.

[9 : 37] Now, let's just say this particular sales assistant didn't succeed in assisting a sale with me on that particular occasion. I've no idea if he sold his car. The thing is, you see, his mind was in the wrong place.

His preoccupation was elsewhere. And sometimes people might think that Christians, when they talk about prayer, and particularly if they come out with a phrase like the one I'm using right now, you know, glance at your problems but gaze upon God, that it's that.

It's kind of like being away with the fairies. It's just like, you know, you ignore, pretend that reality doesn't exist because you're preoccupied with this idea of a God in a distant heaven.

No, it's not that at all. It really isn't. To gaze upon God means, yes, we glance upon our problems. We know they're there. Think of the car.

You're driving along. You know what's going on in the mirror because you're glancing at it. But you're preoccupied by what's in front. Why? Because you need to keep moving. Gaze upon your problems.

[10:41] Gaze upon God but glance upon problems. It's not denying the problems. It does involve a shift of focus.

Now, I'm not going to pretend that's easy. It's not. I'm, like anybody else, instinctively tend to gravitate towards what's going wrong.

It's something I know takes effort. It's hard and it's counterintuitive. But I believe it's what we see Paul and Barnabas do. So let's just quickly go back to that reading and see what it is that they do because I think there's two things that stand out that gives us a little bit of practical advice as to what that actually might mean in real life terms.

To glance at your problems but to gaze upon God. The first is this. They keep going. You know, when trouble comes their way and there's a fair dose of it in just these few verses of scripture, Paul nearly gets stoned to death.

But they keep going. Verse 3 tells us Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there. Then in verse 7 it says they continued to preach. In other words, they didn't stop.

[11:56] They didn't give up the first hurdle. They carried on. They kept on keeping on. I've just had that amazing privilege of being on sabbatical for three months.

I'm smiling. I'm happy. Even though it's September. But whilst I was on sabbatical one of the things I was able to do was go to a few churches where I'm not the minister and where I just pitched up. And a few churches not in the immediate vicinity but within the region. And it was a wonderful experience. One particular Sunday I was sat in a church in Bristol and somebody was telling a story.

A story about how they were going through a really, really tough time. And because they were going through a tough time they were crying out to God in prayer. They were convinced and the phrase that they used was this that they were at the end of their tether.

I don't know if you've ever used that phrase before. I know I have. They felt that they were at the end of their tether and that they made their prayer. And they cried out to God in their prayer Lord I am at the end of my tether.

[12:57] Now they said they felt a very, very real answer back. Not an audible voice but they sensed an overwhelming feeling that God was actually saying you're telling me that you're at the end of your tether.

You're not. Now as another human being I would not ever say that to another human being. I wouldn't say to somebody else no you're not. Because that would that would seem like I'm not human.

It would seem like I don't take them seriously. But I think God's entitled to talk like that to people when he wants to. Now this person they couldn't prove that it was God speaking to them but it was this overwhelming sense of liberation came over them.

This sense of peace that actually God was saying to them no your perception your perception is that you've got no more left to give. That you're at the end of that tether. That you cannot go any further no matter how far you dig deep.

There is nothing left. But no. You're wrong. There is far more there and I'm going to help you. And I think that is a basic simple reality that is there that often our perception is that we've hitched the end and we've got nothing left inside of us.

[14:10] I want to say to you that if you ever feel that way just remember that story I've just shared because God's view of you is different from your view of you. Paul and Barnabas kept on keeping on because they knew that the God upon whom they gazed was so much bigger upon the problems upon which they glanced.

The second thing that we can put out of this and I want to come back to where we started is when they said to the crowds we too are only human.

As the crowd started going absolute bananas over the response to the prayer that they just made when somebody had been healed they said no no there's nothing special about us we too are human. Translated into a practical strategy in terms of what it means to glance at your problems but to gaze upon God it tells us this quite simply they pointed away from themselves and to God. They pointed away from themselves. See that's what it means to gaze upon God means not to gaze inwardly on yourself not to become preoccupied with what you've got going on in yourself. Notice not only did they glance at their problems but they only glanced at the miracle as well. Somebody had just been healed. If you or I were in that situation that's where our attention would be but not theirs.

[15 : 38] You see it applied to everything both the good and the exciting and the amazing as well as the bad. They just glanced on it because their focus their preoccupation was on God.