

An Early Rift

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on May the 9th 1999. The preacher is Gavin Ward.

His sermon is entitled An Early Rift, R-I-F-T, and is from Acts chapter 15 verse 36 through to chapter 16 verse 5.

May the words of my lips and the thoughts of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight. Amen. Please be seated.

A young woman sits on the steps of Flinders Street Station. She's breastfeeding her baby. She looks a little bedraggled, like she has nowhere to go.

And another woman comes, a young woman, and sits beside her. She also has a baby and she starts breastfeeding as well. And the two of them strike up a conversation.

[1 : 15] But there's something very different about the first woman I spoke of. What is it? We'll find out later.

I'll return to that later. The passage we're talking from today and looking at today is from Acts chapter 15. It's on page 900 of the Church Bibles.

Page 900, if you'd like to follow along, Acts 15. And in this passage, Paul begins his second missionary journey. He was intending to go back over the churches that he'd already visited, but it ends up moving on, as we'll learn, in coming weeks as part of his missionary journey.

And we've just had the Jerusalem Council, if you've been following the series, with us here. And Paul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch to let them know some of the decisions that came out of the Jerusalem Council.

And they're there teaching and preaching. And that's where we pick it up today. And there's two incidents that occur that start Paul's second missionary journey. The first is a confrontation. And the second is a concession.

[2 : 26] And we're going to look at each of these this morning. Firstly, the confrontation. And that's at the end of chapter 15, verses 36 on. And here we read that Paul suggests to Barnabas that they return to the churches that they've established in their first missionary journey to see how they're doing, to see how they're going in their faith, to answer some questions that they might have, to pastor them and to see how they're going.

In verse 37, Barnabas wants to take John Mark. John Mark had travelled with them on their first missionary journey, or part of it at least. And so he said, well, let's take John Mark along as a helper with us.

Verse 38, Paul insists no. The language indicates that he's very firm. And he insists no, no way. And then when we read a reason, we'll get back to that shortly.

But in verse 39, we read very sadly that there was a major disagreement, a very sharp disagreement between the two of them. They parted company. They'd been through so much together.

They'd suffered persecutions. They had established churches. They'd brought many to know Christ. And yet here are these two men parting company with a sharp disagreement.

[3 : 41] Why is this disagreement taking place? Well, we read of Paul's view in verse 38. He says that Mark deserted them in Pamphylia. And that's the incident recorded earlier in Acts chapter 13.

There it records that Mark left to go back to Jerusalem. Paul's view of it is that he deserted them, that he'd been disloyal to them. And he had not gone along with them and accompanied them in the work that they were doing.

Paul's view might be summed up, when the going got tough, Mark got going out. He said, you can't afford to have passengers. We must pull together in this missionary work.

Well, Barnabas's view, he was related to Mark, by the way. They were cousins. And he wanted to give Mark, perhaps he wanted to give Mark a second chance. Perhaps he could see some potential in Mark and wanted to give him a second chance.

And there's some other reasons suggested which are really just problematical. But what we do know out of the reading is that Luke records that there was a split between the two.

[4 : 49] And the language that Luke uses is that there was no blame to be apportioned either way. He just records that there was a split. What's happened here?

Let's just pause for a moment. What's happened here? There's two very committed Christians, both committed to proclaiming the gospel, to reaching out to people, and yet they've had a blue and they've parted company.

Can we read this this morning and say, well, this is a formula for us to have a blue. It's on after church in the hall. It'll be really good stuff. But the next vestry meeting or the AGM, let's go for it. No. No, that's not what's being said here. I think there's two lessons that we're learning out of this this morning, two things that are being said. Firstly, Luke is very honest in his recording of events. He's not frightened of controversy and actually recording controversy. He's not running away from the fact that there was a dispute between these two guys. Therefore, we can trust what he is writing because he is honest in his recording of the events.

[5 : 59] We can trust what Luke says in Acts and in his gospel for that matter. And the Bible is very trustworthy and very honest as it records failings of people.

As you know, it records that Peter denied Jesus. It records that the disciples fled and ran away frightened when Jesus was crucified. It records that David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. The Bible is very honest about failings of people. So we can trust it because it is honest. Secondly, I think Luke is trying to explain to us why Barnabas isn't mentioned anymore in Acts.

I mean, he's been very involved with Paul in his first missionary journey and he's not involved anymore. Luke doesn't record him again. So he's trying to give us an understanding as to why that would take place.

And he tells us that there was a disagreement and the two-parted company. Luke doesn't make a song or dance about it at all. He just records the facts and then moves on with the story. So we read that Barnabas takes off with Mark and they head west to Cyprus.

[7 : 04] They head west to Cyprus. That was Barnabas' home where he came from and also where Mark, that was part of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. And so they go back there and Mark, John Mark, had already been part of that missionary journey.

So they head west and Paul, what does he do? Well, he chooses Silas. Silas comes off the interchange bench to replace Barnabas. And he chooses Silas. We know Silas was an elder in the Jerusalem church who was sent by the Jerusalem church to let people know about the decrees from the council that we've heard about in previous weeks.

And so he chooses Silas. And they go northwest to Syria and Cilicia to deliver the letter from the council. And that's who the letter's addressed to, those churches up in the northwest.

So both churches, both groups are covered from the first missionary journey. Mark and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, both groups covered from the first missionary journey.

So what's the outcome of the split then? Well, the outcome is that God blesses both their works. The gospel is proclaimed now in two groups. And we know about what happens with Paul as he heads off onto his second and third missionary journeys and the great work that he does in proclaiming the gospel and establishing churches.

[8 : 23] And even though Luke doesn't record any more work of Barnabas and Mark, Paul does refer to them. He calls Barnabas a fellow worker. In 1 Corinthians, which is an event after this, he calls Barnabas a companion of his.

And in Philemon, he calls Mark a fellow worker. And in fact, in 2 Timothy, Paul calls for Mark to be near him when Paul is close to death because he says he's very helpful for me in my ministry.

So it seems like the rift has been healed over there. And Barnabas and Mark do some great work. And of course, we know Mark writes a great gospel for us, don't we? So the lesson here is that even though there's sin and there's failure in those two men having a blue, God works through it. God won't be constrained by our sin. God will still work through us. And the Bible is full of stories which we don't have time to really explore this morning. But God blesses our work that takes place even as a result of our own human failure before him.

That's the confrontation. The second event that takes place is the concession. The concession. And that's in chapter 16, the first five verses there.

[9 : 44] And we read in verse 1 that they're going back over the churches from the first journey. And when they get to Lystra, they go through Derbe. And when they get to Lystra, they meet a disciple called Timothy.

And Paul is obviously very fond of Timothy because he refers to him later on in 1 Corinthians and also in 1 Timothy as his beloved son in the faith. So it seems like Paul has had a personal involvement in Timothy's conversion to Christianity.

What else do we know about Timothy? Well, we see that Timothy's mother was a Jewess who has now become a Christian. And we know her name was Eunice from 2 Timothy. We also know that Timothy's father was a Greek.

So his mother, Jewess, the father of Greek. And he's also got a good reputation, Timothy. The churches in the area, they speak well of him. The believers speak well of Timothy.

So Paul wants Timothy on his journey with him, with Silas. So probably as a replacement for Mark, as a helper. And Timothy would have an important ministry because being a mother, a Jew and a father, a Greek, he would have a foot into both camps.

[10 : 55] He would be able to relate to both groups of people. So naturally, Paul goes off and gets Timothy circumcised, ready for the job. Hang on a minute.

Hang on. What's going on here? What is Paul doing? He's just finished arguing at the Jerusalem Council and the leadership there have agreed that Gentiles don't have to be circumcised.

You don't have to be circumcised and go under the law to get salvation. And so, what does he do?

The first person with Gentile, maybe the first person with Gentile origin, he gets him circumcised.

I mean, how inconsistent is that? Has Paul lost the plot? It looks like he's been very inconsistent, doesn't it? A bit like umpires. And don't talk to me about the Essendon-Melbourne game yesterday.

Paul is actually being perfectly consistent. Very consistent with the decrees from the Council. Let me explain. The issue here is Timothy's mother was a Jew, Jewish origin, father, a Greek.

[12 : 08] Now, from the Jews' point of view, Timothy would have been seen to be a Jew because in Jewish law and in their religion, the child took the religion of the mother.

So, he would have been seen to be a Jew. But they would have known that his father was a Greek. And under Greek law, the father ruled the home. And so, the father would probably have been unwilling to have Timothy circumcised.

It was a mixed marriage like that. So, the Jews would have seen him as a Jew, but probably illegitimate. It's possible they would have seen him as being illegitimate because he hadn't been circumcised.

A real barrier if Timothy wants to reach out and minister to Jews because he would have this offensive thing. He would have been seen as being illegitimate and probably reluctant to hear him. So, what's the issue with the Jerusalem Council? The issue there is that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised for salvation.

[13 : 11] And in verse 19 of chapter 15, James says, We do not want to make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Therefore, they don't need to be circumcised.

We don't want to put a barrier in front of them for them to come to know the Lord. We want to remove the barrier of circumcision. Now, maybe it's a bit like us when we learn to swim.

We learn to swim, we become a swimmer. And once you do that, you can swim. And you don't need to wear bathers to be a swimmer.

You can swim without anything on. Some beaches allow you to do that. But the principle is you can be a swimmer without wearing bathers. However, so as not to cause offence to people, we wear bathers when we go to the swimming pool or to the beach.

So as not to cause offence. The same thing is happening here. The principle has been established in the Jerusalem Council. Circumcision is not required.

[14 : 14] However, not to cause offence to the Jews, because of that relationship, having a mother as a Jew and a father as a Greek. Paul says, in verse 38, he says, because of the Jews in those places, they all knew his father was a Greek, so he's probably uncircumcised.

He wants to remove the barrier of Timothy's uncircumcision to the Jews. Therefore, for the sake of the gospel, he has Timothy circumcised.

And we go on and we read in verses 4 and 5 that they proceed through the region of Galatia to the churches there, delivering the decisions of the Jerusalem Council about food laws, about for the sake of fellowship, Gentiles abstaining from food laws and sexual immorality, etc., or adhering to the food laws, I should say.

And the result is that we see a lot of action and movement taking place. They're travelling around and they're preaching and the gospel's being proclaimed. And we know that because it's increasing numbers.

The church is increasing in numbers. People are coming to know Jesus as their saviour. Why? Because there's a follow-up occurring with new Christians. There's no burden on the Gentiles for circumcision.

[15:30] There's fellowship taking place between Jewish and Gentile Christians. They're working together. And there's access to the Jews. No barriers. Let's think a little bit about the barrier a bit more.

What ought our attitude be when issues of the gospel are at stake? Are there barriers which we erect, which we have to think about? Barriers which we have even in our own lives or as an Anglican church or as churches in Australia or as this congregation here which might inhibit the true proclamation of the gospel in our culture?

How sensitive are we to the needs of the 21st century person or trying to connect with the 21st century person today? I mean there's a generation of people out there and they're probably only about 10 years younger than me who have little or absolutely no church background at all.

I mean my next door neighbour came in to me at Easter and I was washing the car on the front lawn and he came in and said to me, Gavin, can you help me out a bit? I'm trying to explain a little bit to my son about Easter but I'm not really sure of the events.

Can you just go over me again Good Friday? What actually happened? I'm not really sure. And then something happened on Easter Sunday. Can you just quickly just go through that with me again? He had no idea. And I had to just explain.

[16:57] It was a great opportunity of course but I had to explain to him so that he could tell his son. He said, I just want my son to know this sort of stuff because it's called Easter. I mean people have no idea. There was another young fellow I was talking to who was only in his early 20s and he was interested in Christianity so through another church we were able to get him a Good News Bible and I presented it to him and he just looked at it blankly.

What do I do with this? He had no idea of the thing called the Old Testament no idea of the New Testament no idea of books and chapters and verses and anything. Completely blank.

Had no idea about Christianity. They are the people who are growing up in our society in Melbourne in the suburbs in 1990s. Do we expect people who come into our church to adopt our church culture or are we prepared to remove some of the barriers some of the things that might inhibit them some of the things that might inhibit our proclamation of the gospel?

I mean here at Holy Trinity and I'm only new here as you know and I've just observed over the last few months there's some great things happening with the Mandarin ministry. It's terrific. And ESL classes. And Alpha courses.

And discipleship courses. Really great. And there's probably other things that are going on that would be that I'm not aware of. But great stuff that's linking into the community etc. But I think we need to continuously work through these issues in our own lives and in the life of the church.

[18:25] Reassess the ways we're connecting to our culture to proclaim the gospel to people. We continually need to rethink and we don't change anything for change's sake but we do change things for the gospel's sake.

The gospel doesn't change but for the gospel's sake we do. Nothing should stand in our way when issues of the gospel are at stake.

Now I don't have the answers and I struggle with these issues myself. I mean I was brought up on the 1662 service. As a child I sang hymns and I've been brought up in a very Anglican service. But I struggle and wrestle with how relevant we are sometimes to what happens out there and connecting with people from out there. I do know, one thing I do know is that the scripture is adamant in our proclamation of the gospel.

I read from Paul's own words 1 Corinthians chapter 9 he says, I've become all things to all people that I might by all means save some and I do it all for the sake of the gospel.

[19 : 42] I see the passion of the apostle Paul to do whatever it takes to let others know about Christ.

I also see a car park at Bunnings on a Sunday morning filled with cars. And I also see when I was coming across here on Easter Sunday to church past the Won Turner Market and the car park was absolutely packed and there was a queue outside waiting to get in.

And my heart aches for those people who are heading for eternal punishment because they don't know of the love of God through Jesus Christ for them.

Timothy was circumcised to remove a barrier for the sake of the gospel and we read the results as the church grew.

We need to think about the same things ourselves. Back to the steps of Flinders Street Station.

What's different about that first young woman I spoke of?

[21 : 00] The difference is she didn't have to be there. She had noticed that there were many single young women, mothers, in Melbourne, in the suburbs and she wanted to know how to reach out to them and she noticed that many of them congregated around Flinders Street Station and other areas as well because they had nowhere to go and her mission is to reach out to those folk in our society.

What better way to do that than to remove the barriers and get down beside them and work with them? She changed and removed the barriers for the sake of the gospel.

May we also be prepared to change and remove barriers for others for the sake of the gospel.

Amen.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for the truth of your word to us today. Thank you for the honesty in which it portrays to us a confrontation which took place.

Thank you that even through our sin and our failure you can still work wonderful deeds and proclaim your word.

[22 : 25] And Father, help us through the challenge of Timothy's circumcision. Help us to think about barriers that we might have in our own lives or in the way we operate as a church.

Barriers which might be there to people coming to know you. Help us as we wrestle with these issues for the sake of the gospel. In Jesus' name.

Amen.