

Changes the world (Commitment Sunday 2013)

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Gracious Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you for your church. I pray that as we look into your word this morning that we might see something of our heritage and that as we look to the future that we might be committed to the name Christ and seeing that name declared and glorified throughout this area of Chatswood.

We pray for your sake. Amen. St. Paul's first ministry in the Chatswood area began almost or just over 112 years ago with a Sunday school on the 1st of September 1901.

It wasn't a great start because no one turned up. The weather wasn't so great. Three children turned up the next week and the first official church service was a couple of months later on the 8th of December 1901.

The official opening of St. Paul's was conducted on the 15th of December 1901 by the Archdeacon of Cumberland, the Venerable John Langley, to whom my wife Natalie is a direct descendant.

So I am married into St. Paul's history more than most. A new church doesn't just pop up.

[1 : 31] It doesn't just arrive one Sunday. Many things happen over a period of time before any church, and a church like St. Paul's comes to be.

And as always, with anything, there are different motives and agendas at play in order to see something like a church pop up. And some of those agendas and motives lack any sort of vision. There are those who are dissatisfied with the ministry of another church and figure it's much better to start our own thing. There are those who felt that the church was a good place for social activities. For others, it was a place for mutual support and friendships and family interactions and cultural pursuits.

For others, the church is a healthy place for young people of marriageable age. That is St. Paul's the dating service before RSVP and all those other things came into being.

On the other hand, there are those with a real gospel vision. There are those who are doing evangelism on steam trains.

[2 : 39] A boy riding the district on horseback to break the news of a Sunday school and a church coming into being. There were the four young men who in the summer of 1901-02 met weekly for prayer before dawn out in the bush and spent time walking around looking for potential church sites to plant a church.

And so here we are, 112 years later, on the site that was chosen. It's Commitment Sunday.

We're thinking about commitment to the mission and vision of St. Paul's here in Chatswood as we look ahead to 2014 and beyond.

And my question for us today is what is it about our beginning that will most define our present and our future as a church?

Is it St. Paul's the dating service? Or is it a gospel-driven vision? And so in thinking about that question, what is it about our beginnings that will so define our present, our future, I want us to take us back to the beginning?

[4 : 05] Back past 112 years on the lower north shore of Sydney, back past the Anglican Church starting with chaplain arriving with the first fleet, back past the act of supremacy in November 1534, that brought the Church of England into existence, back to the first century and the church in Antioch.

The church in Antioch is our mother church. It is our ancestry. It is our bloodline. In the first half of chapter 11, Peter is up in front of the leaders in Jerusalem explaining why he, as a Jew, had gone to the house of a Gentile and eaten with them.

He went to explain how Cornelius and his family had received the Holy Spirit and came to put their trust in the Lord Jesus. It's the first instance of Christian faith breaching Jewish circles.

And so, in chapter 11, verse 18, we have the response of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, so then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.

And so, this means that unless you are a Jew, Antioch, in the very next verse, is your mother church.

[5 : 47] As the first Gentile church, my hope is that something of its heartbeat might define something of our heartbeat. And there are a number of things you could pull out of here in this, but I just want to pick on a few.

A number of the characteristics of our mother church that we must commit to emulating as we look to the future at St. Paul's. Notice, first of all, our mother church's commitment to representing Jesus where God had placed them.

Verse 19, Acts 11. If you haven't got your Bibles, you need to have your Bibles open. Or your iPads or whatever it is you've got.

Acts 11. Verse 19. Now, those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

[6 : 54] The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. So chapter 11, verse 19, takes us back to chapter 8, verse 1, and the scattering of the believers as a result of the persecution relating to the martyrdom of Stephen.

And some of these persecuted believers went as far as Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria and the third largest city in the empire.

And as they went, as they were scattered, they simply talked about Jesus. What was in their hearts came out of their mouth.

These unnamed Jews from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene with no official direction, no human instruction, no precedent to follow, nothing but a burning love for Christ took the good news of the Lord Jesus to Antioch.

They were probably not even aware that they were doing something radical, no clue about their, the revolutionary greatness of their act.

[8 : 13] They were the first believers to bring the explosive light of the gospel into the pitch black darkness of paganism in Antioch.

Antioch was evangelized not by apostles, but by average members of the body of Christ who just simply represent Jesus because Jesus had pushed them there.

Wherever these refugees landed, Jesus was on display. Sharing Christ to them appears to be as natural as tears to sorrow and as smiles to happiness.

Everyday believers empowered by the Holy Spirit blew away the hold of paganism on needy souls and the result was a great harvest in Antioch. Verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

We see it again in verse 24, a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Luke is very careful here to stress the sovereign providence of God behind the growth of this church.

[9 : 29] It was the Lord's hand, did you see that? It was the Lord's hand that was responsible for the success. No apostles, no parish council, no ecclesiastical structure, just the Lord's hand and a tremendous number of new believers.

But it doesn't negate the personal witness of the disciples who chose to accomplish his sovereign purpose.

This is his appointed means. Christians representing Jesus where he has put them, wherever that might be.

Now let me say, there would be few churches that would confess that they have no interest in mission.

Many operate like they have no interest in mission, but there'd be few who would confess they have no interest in mission. Most want to be a light in a dark place.

[10 : 39] Too many, however, I fear operate like a lighthouse in a dark place. Our focus is illuminating the far off distances, but leaving the area around our base plunged in darkness.

no church will ever become a missionary church unless it possesses a vigorous grassroots concern for mission to the non-Christian world where they are.

This is our mission field right here. if we are not concerned for the good news of the Lord Jesus increasing and spreading where God has put us, there is no genuine concern for gospel impact thousands of kilometers away.

the commitment to local mission for this church at Antioch did in fact flow over to the rest of the world. Acts chapter 13 we see Barnabas and Paul are sent from Antioch to the rest of the world. Antioch became the launching pad for global mission. it was the base for Paul's missionary journeys and it started with disciples representing Jesus right there in Antioch.

[12:11] To represent Jesus where he's put us in Chatswood is to keep in step with our mother church. It is our heritage, our bloodline. Representing Jesus as written into our mission statement is one of the reasons that we exist local and global impact is one of our core values and mobilizing members for local mission is one of the five strategies that we are working on in order to accomplish vision 2020.

Our stated ministry objective out there on the door on the way out is that by the end of next year is to see 500 people attending church each week here at St. Paul's.

That's our mission, that's our focus, that's our objective. we are praying and laboring to see people come to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus, not transferring from another church, not interested in that. That doesn't mean I'm not interested in you, if that's what you've done, I'm just saying our focus is to see people come to know Christ. Christ. praise God for the person in five o'clock congregation who responded to back to church Sunday invitation, went immediately into Christianity, explored and gave their life to Christ two Sundays ago, I think it was.

Make a commitment to pursue this goal in 2014, here today on Commitment Sunday. Notice also our mother church's commitment to establishing believers in the faith.

[14:02] Again, this is something of our heritage and our bloodline that we want to emulate today. In verse 22 we see the church in Jerusalem gets a wind of all that's happening in Antioch and so they send one of its main men to check it out.

And Barnabas likes what he sees, verse 23, when he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all of their hearts. You see, he liked what he saw, but his concern was to nurture this young multicultural church in Antioch. And in verse 25 we see he brings in extra help to make sure it happens effectively. It says, then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.

That's about a 160 kilometer journey. And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. And so for the whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. Great numbers of people were taught. And what were they taught? Acts 20 verse 27 leads me to believe that they were taught the whole will of God. The emphasis on establishment is again seen in chapter 14 verses 21 to 23 where the missionaries are returning from the first missionary journey and it says they were strengthening the disciples and encouraging them and appointing elders.

[15:28] I want to suggest to you that everything that this church is and does here at Antioch comes back to God's grace and the fact that they were well established in the truth and they were growing in maturity in Christ.

People coming to know Jesus is not the only reason we exist. We want to see people grow into maturity in Christ and becoming more like him.

We want to see people standing firm and secure in Christ. Barnabas' desire for the church at Antioch is for them to remain true to the Lord with all of their hearts and that ought to be our desire as well.

And that's why our missionary objective is not just to have 500 people sitting in church but to see growth in core membership to 150. As I've said a number of times, core membership is really simple and practical.

It's just a visible expression that I as an individual are living out what we value here as a church. That's all it is.

[16:34] Devotion to prayer, Christ-centered Bible saturation, humble authenticity, treasuring Jesus together, servant leadership, radical generosity, local and global impact. commitment.

And so here on Commitment Sunday 2013, make a commitment to grow in those core values next year.

And especially to grow deeper in knowing and treasuring Jesus by saturating yourself in the scriptures. notice too that there is an attitude expressed here in the Barnabas-Saw relationship at

our mother church that would have impacted the way that this whole church served and I believe we need to follow in their footsteps here something of our bloodline that we need to emulate. Barnabas is not an apostle but he is one of the main men in the Jerusalem church. Barnabas' goodness was expressed in his generosity of the church in chapter 4 and also in him sticking out his neck to commend Paul to the apostles in chapter 9.

But here we find something I think even more beautiful than chapter 4 and chapter 9 because Barnabas would soon yield his preeminence to Paul.

[18:00] Barnabas was older. Barnabas was more respected, more widely known and in many ways he was way more experienced than Paul.

But when he asked Paul to come and help him in Antioch in verse 25 and when they later commenced their missionary journey together in chapter 13, Paul began to play a greater role than Barnabas.

It begins with Barnabas and Saul and soon it becomes Paul and Barnabas and it stayed that way to the end. Barnabas to Paul was like John the Baptist to Christ.

He must become greater, I must become less. And it wasn't because Barnabas is like I'm a little old now, it's retirement time, need someone to come and fill the shoes that I've been running, ministries I've been doing.

What I see here is an attitude of humility and an attitude of strategy. In Acts chapter 9 we read of the miraculous conversion of Saul.

[19:15] God then says this about Saul in verse 15 of Acts 9, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings.

And at the end of chapter 9, Barnabas is the one who takes Saul to the apostles and commends him for all that he's been doing.

And so Barnabas must have known that it was Paul's calling to be apostle to the Gentiles. And here is Barnabas now in Antioch seven, eight years later with all these Gentile conversions surrounding him and he must have thought Paul's the man.

This is Paul's domain. This is what Paul has been set apart to do. And so Barnabas puts his ego to one side and allows Paul to rise up over him.

all for the sake of the word of God increasing and spreading. It is a glimpse of genuine humility and it's a glimpse of gospel strategy and it's a glimpse of sacrificial leadership.

[20:45] You see when Paul and traveled with Barnabas to heathen Antioch they were the original dynamic duo before Batman and Robin came into being.

They complemented one another beautifully. Barnabas soft, gentle, pastoral, heart, son of encouragement, known for that.

Paul, sharp, legal mind, argue with anyone. They complemented one another beautifully thanks to the expert orchestration of the Spirit of God.

Barnabas sensitive, empathetic, gracious, Paul had a brilliant hone, razor sharp, lawyer's intellect and together the Spirit of God worked together powerfully and together humbly appreciating one another, they were almost unconquerable.

And so I want to encourage you as Commitment Sunday 2013, make a commitment to use your gifts to serve the body of Christ and to serve with this kind of heart and this kind of strategic thinking, a heart that says whatever serves the advancement of the gospel through this place, I will do it even if it means I step down.

[22:11] Notice also our mother church's commitment to generosity, again this is something of our heritage and our bloodline that we must emulate today.

Verse 27, during this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, one of them named Agabus stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

this happened during the reign of Claudius, the disciples each according to his ability decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea and this they did sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Luke's main concern here in letting us know this is not so much the fulfillment of Agabus' prophecy as with the generous response of the church in Antioch.

There was a need and they responded. They gave to the need each according to his ability is what it says there.

[23 : 17] I want to suggest to you that generosity is a plain biblical principle and generosity should characterize the family of God as it did right in our very beginning as a church in Acts 2 in the way they shared with one another.

I was really encouraged and significantly challenged by a pastor who said recently that he and his wife made a commitment to grow in generosity every year of their marriage.

Every year of their marriage. And under God they made a plan to increase the percentage of what God gave, what they gave away year by year to ministry, to all sorts of other needs.

And after many, many years of marriage, they are now giving away 94% of all income that comes in. Friends, we need to see the opportunity that God has given us in the wealthy West to meet needs and demonstrate the character of our generous God.

And what we are doing here today in pledging off a tree and making gifts to see the word of God increase and spread is in our heritage.

[24 : 42] Way back, way back to our origin in Antioch in first century. Also happens to be in our heritage. It supports Chatswood.

It says here that voluntary subscriptions, payable any time during the year to the stipend and building funds, are earnestly solicited from all those desirous of assisting in the movement.

That is, the movement of seeing the gospel go to Chatswood. It is decided on here that no bazaars, sales of works or morning teas be resorted to obtain funds.

It is hoped that every member of the congregation will at once notify their promise of subscriptions. Generosity is in our heritage.

And so make a commitment to see the word of God increase and spread and be generous in 2014. Let me just take you to I think one of the most wonderful and heartwarming and almost throwaway statements in this passage and I think it serves as an overarching statement to describe our mother church.

[25 : 58] It's found, it's almost, it is a throwaway line almost but nothing's ever really thrown away in the word of God. It is found at the end of verse 26. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

In the first century Antioch, back first century, Antioch was a melting pot of at least five different cultures. People came far, to live in Antioch, people came as far away as China to live in the Las Vegas of the Roman Empire.

It was known for two things, its chariot races and its deliberate pursuit of pleasure. Antioch was most famous in terms of its pursuit of pleasure for its worship of the goddess Daphne.

Apollo's famous pursuit of Daphne was reenacted each night by the men of Antioch pursuing the Daphne temple prostitutes.

Every night. And throughout the world, the morals of Daphne was a euphemism for depravity. A depravity that has its centre at Antioch, a city of sensuality and depravity.

[27 : 25] And if you've been reading the local papers recently, you'll notice that we've got a whole lot of brothels in Chatswood and Crowsnest and it is becoming the red light district of Sydney.

It's astounding. And the church at Antioch was like a flower growing in a putrid bog, a patch of lush grass in a desert, a gospel vitality now burned in the sensual, depraved, materialistic, spiritual darkness of Antioch.

Antioch. And this new church which had formed in Antioch, this flower in the bog was so completely foreign to the bleak environment that it altered the vocabulary of the city and from there the world.

When God's people live for Christ in such depth and power that those who round them have to strive for a new term to describe what they see, that's astounding.

Now perhaps there's a jesting and a mocking edge to the nickname, perhaps there's even a little bit of rage because these people were such a contradiction to the ethos of Antioch.

[28 : 49] The new term which is part Greek and part Latin was a mongrel name but it said it all, Christian, followers of Christ.

Christ was so much on these believers lips, they lived so like Christ that no other name would do. Followers of Christ.

Alexander the Great once learned that in his army was another Alexander who was a notorious coward and Alexander the Great, as you would hopefully know, conquered the then known world at the age of 23.

He called this young coward before him and he said, is your name Alexander and are you named after me? And the trembling coward said, yes sir, my name is Alexander and yes I was named after you.

And the Great General looked at him and said, then either be brave or change your name. Fortunately Christ doesn't say that to us but he does call us to be who we are.

[30 : 17] In two Sundays, it will be 112 years since our first services here in the mission field of Chatswood. St. Paul's was once upon a time a young, newly founded North Shore Antioch.

And praise God that in its 112 years there has been generosity and mission orientation and servant hardness and it's been disciple making church. But we also know something of those things have been lost or not as sharply focused as it could have been.

There were more people in church 112 years ago than what there are here today. And as we launch into the future, my deep commitment is for us to emulate our mother church's vision and passion and commitment to display Christ where he has placed us.

Imagine if there was such a Christ-centered spiritual dynamic operating amongst us that it caused for people to reach for a new name.

[31 : 40] And that is what we are committing to today. We are simply committing to live out who we say we are. We are committing to be worthy of the name Christian in 2014.

So let's commit together to know Jesus and treasure Jesus and represent Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, help us to be loyal, brave, committed followers of Christ who refuse to turn back, who dare to stand firm and to make Christ's name known to all around us, who desire to shine the light of the glory of Christ in the dark world of Chatswood.

Enable us with your spirit, by your spirit that we might have such confidence and joy in Christ that it might overflow into a growing commitment to live out our purpose as your children.

and we ask that you would open us to new horizons of your expansive purposes in this world. Save people and build your church for your glory.

Amen.