

New World

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Great to be in the building with you, but also to connect with you online here at St. Paul's Chatswood. This church, its first ministry to this area began almost 119 years ago. In fact, just over 119 years ago, with a Sunday school scheduled for the 1st of September 1901, no one turned up because it was probably a day like today. It was bad weather and no one arrived. But three children turned up the very 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 the following Sunday from that by the Archdeacon of the Cumberland, the Venerable John Langley. I mentioned his name because my wife Natalie is related to him. So, you know, the

Jeffrey family goes way back to the very beginning of St. Paul's. There was, in starting this church here, in this place, there was a whole heap of different motives behind it. There was those who lacked any sort of a gospel vision for what it might be. There were those who were frankly dissatisfied with the ministry of St. Stephen's Willoughby, and so they came across here to start a new church. There were those who felt that the church was a great place for social activities.

For others, it was a place of mutual support and friendship and family interactions and cultural pursuits. For others, it was a healthy place. The local church is a healthy place for young people of marriageable age to gather together. So St. Paul's dating service, that's dropped off as an official program for the church. Others, on the other hand, had a gospel vision for what might happen here.

There's evangelism, things like evangelism on steam trains and boys riding horseback to break the news at the Sunday school. And there was the four men who gathered in the summer of 1901, 1902, met weekly for prayer before dawn, and were seeking out a place to plant a brand new church in amongst the bush of Chatswood in those days, walking around potential sites and finally landing on the site that we're in right now. So my question for us as we close up this series on Acts, on the first half of Acts, is what is it about our beginning that will define our future as a church of St. Paul's Chatswood?

What is it about our beginning that will define our future? It's an important question because we are looking to the future. We're drawing a close to this part of the Acts. That's one thing, and we're moving on to something next week. But next term, all of term four, we're in fact drawing a close to Vision 2020, our ministry plan which was launched back in 2009. So what's next for us?

[3 : 1 8] What does our future look like? Now, compounding that question is the complexity that we're in at the moment.

is that the Christian church in the West is dramatically changing. Once we existed in an era called Christendom, and Christendom is where basically the state and the church kind of agree with one another and at least walk together with a sense of harmony. With the rise of secularism, materialism, those days of Christendom are long gone for Australia, and this is a new era for us that we have never experienced before in this country as the Christian church.

In this country, there is a rising opposition to religion generally and Christianity in particular. And COVID-19 has changed the way that we do mission and discipleship. Churches used to have a very heavy reliance upon the gathering of people to programs in order to advance the mission of the church.

And with restrictions, as you are fully aware, sitting in this room and at home right now with restrictions, that's not easily achieved. The longer the restrictions are in place, the more our psyche change, the more our habits change. And there will be those who will slip off into a, just because the attraction of just not meeting, they'll get comfortable with the new norm.

So what does our future look like? What does it look like for us? Can the church change the world?

[5 : 19] So I want to pick up Acts chapter 11. Get your Bibles, open it up, get the St. Paul's app, open that up as well. Acts chapter 11, get a glimpse of the church that changed the world.

How it did it and how it shapes our future at St. Paul's. Now, so thinking about our future, I want to take us all the way back. I want to take us back to the past to understand our future. And I want to take us back past 119 years ago in Chatswood, back past the Anglican church starting in Australia, back past the act of supremacy in November 1534, that saw the Church of England established. I want to go all the way back to Antioch, our mother church. And the first half of chapter 11, the bit that wasn't read out to us, Peter is up front of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, explaining why he, a Jew, had gone to the house of a Gentile and eaten with them.

And he went on to explain how a Gentile, in fact, a Roman soldier, Cornelius, and his entire family received the Holy Spirit and came to put their trust in Jesus Christ. And in chapter 11, verse 18, you have the response of the leaders of Jerusalem. It says, And then from that moment, in verses 19 to 21, the scene shifts immediately to Antioch, where a great work of God has been happening amongst the Gentiles, and the first church in the Gentile world has been established. And news of this has spread.

This is the first recorded Gentile church. This is our mother church, if you like. And this is the church that changed the world. Now, there are a number of characteristics here, and I just want to just cherry pick them really quickly as I go through. A number of characteristics about this mother church that we must commit to, seek to emulate as we look forward to our future here as a church.

First of all, chapter 11, verse 19, this church's commitment to bearing witness to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ wherever they were. Now, those who have been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

[8 : 07] Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Gentiles also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. And the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Chapter 11, verse 19, takes us back to chapter 8, verse 1, and the scattering of the believers from Jerusalem because of the persecution and martyrdom of Stephen. Now, some of these persecuted believers went as far as Antioch, the capital, the Roman province of Syria, and the third largest city.

In the Roman Empire. And as they went, they simply talked about Jesus and the gospel and the hope that they had in him. That is, what had shaped their hearts just simply came out of their mouth.

These unnamed Jews, and they are unnamed Jews from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene, no official direction. There's no human instruction. There's no precedent to follow. There's no manual to pull off the shelf about what do we do now. Nothing but a burning passion for Jesus Christ took the good news of the Lord Jesus to Antioch. And they were probably even unaware that they were doing anything radical at all.

No clue about the revolutionary greatness of their act as they simply gossiped the gospel and the global impact that will happen from Antioch.

[9 : 59] Antioch. They were the first believers to bring the explosive light of the gospel into the pitch black darkness of paganism. Antioch was evangelized, not by the apostles, but by average members of Christ's body who simply bore witness to Jesus in their daily lives, unaware of the amplification of that work to the ends of the earth, even 20 centuries later.

Sharing Christ to them was as natural as tears are to sorrow, or a smile is to happiness. Everyday believers, empowered by the Holy Spirit, blew away the hold of paganism on needy souls.

And the result is 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 really careful here in writing this to stress the sovereign providence of God behind the growth of the church here.

It was the Lord's hand that was primarily responsible for the success. There's no apostles in this. There's no parish council.

[11 : 27] There's no ecclesiastical structure. Just the Lord's hand and a great number of believers. Of course, it doesn't negate the personal witness of the disciples.

He chose to use them to accomplish his sovereign purposes. This is his appointed means. Ordinary Christians bearing witness to Jesus where he has put them.

Even in the most difficult of circumstances. And this commitment to local mission for this church at Antioch did in fact flow over to the rest of the world.

It started here and it went to the... Chapter 13, Barnabas and Paul are sent from Antioch to the rest of the world. I love it that these people sent their best people.

They were concerned for God's global kingdom. Not their own kingdom building, God's global kingdom. Antioch in fact became the launching pad for global mission as it was the base for Paul's missionary journeys from here on in.

[12 : 40] Which ultimately would cause for 20 centuries later for the gospel to land in places like Chatswood.

So I want to ask you first of all, how are you emulating at your mother church in your own personal life? Are you bearing witness to Jesus where you are? Let me go a little bit deeper.

Do you even know how to do that? Do you even know what it is that you believe? And how to articulate and communicate that? If you don't, please speak to Adrian.

He would love to work with you. He's right here. I knew he's in the building somewhere. He's right there. Right there. Speak to Adrian straight after the service. He would love to work with you on that.

Also, last week my challenge was to deal with the Klintos shortfall, financial shortfall. I am pleased to say that there is now enough money there for the September transfer.

[13 : 53] That is fantastic. But then there is October, November, December to come. Keep giving to global mission. Secondly, we see our mother church's commitment to growing together in Jesus, of discipling, if you like.

Growing each other as mature followers of Jesus must be a core focus of our future. Now, this one's crucial. This one is crucial.

Because many global church leaders are saying that discipleship, discipling, intentional discipling, has become a matter of urgency for the church.

It is something that the church has lost sight of in the West. I'll come back to that in a moment. In verse 22, we see the church in Jerusalem gets wind of all that's happening in Antioch.

And so they send one of its main men to check it out. Barnabas likes what he sees. In verse 23, when he arrived, he saw the evidence of the grace of God. And he was glad and he was encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all of their hearts.

[15 : 09] And then he went back to Jerusalem. No, he didn't. He saw the work of God. He liked what he saw.

But he was concerned that this young church, this multi-ethnic church, be disciplined, be grown up in the faith.

Verse 25, we see that he brings in extra help to make it happen effectively. Have a look. Verse 25. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.

That's 160 kilometers on foot or on a donkey. And he found him and he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

Great numbers of people taught. What were they taught? Acts chapter 20 verse 27 leads me to believe they were taught the whole will of God. The emphasis on establishment is seen again in chapter 14 verses 21 to 23.

[16 : 20] When the missionaries return, it says they were strengthening the disciples and encouraging them and appointing elders to do the work of teaching and training. Everything this church is and does comes back to God's grace and the fact that they are well established in the truth and growing in maturity in Jesus together.

That is, there's a direct link between growth in faith and living out the Christian life.

A direct link between those two things. You see, no one gives birth to a child and assumes the job's done at childbirth. No one assumes that's the job.

Done. Completed. Finished. The goal for that child is that it may grow into full maturity and frankly not be a delinquent. That's the job. And on one level, and take this very lightly, being a male, giving birth is the easy part.

And don't hold me to that. The years and years of growing that child continues on and it is hard labour.

[17 : 50] We must labour hard, sacrifice, love, teach, equip, disciple, discipline to see people standing firm and secure and mature and content in Jesus.

Jesus' command to his disciples is to take up your cross and follow me. It is to follow him fully. To surrender to him completely. And to discover wonderful liberation.

When we do. The Christians who are playing with superficial commitment, superficial discipleship, are wasting their lives and missing out.

Missing out on the great adventure that following Jesus actually is. Following him wholeheartedly actually is. Now there's going to be more for this coming in the coming months.

So stay tuned. This is a precursor message to an upcoming vision series. But what's your next step?

[18 : 59] Can I ask you, who are you discipling? If you're a mature follower of Jesus, who are you actually intentionally discipling right now? I mean, I'm not asking you what program you're running. I'm asking you, who are you intentionally discipling?

And if you're someone who needs to be disciplined, look for someone. Are you actually intentionally being disciplined? Maybe your first step today is to get out there and join a community group.

Maybe that's your first step you need to take. To intentionally grow. What is your next step? Next step to following Jesus. Thirdly, we see a commitment to humble service like Jesus.

Barnabas is not an apostle, but he is one of the main men of the church in Jerusalem. And Barnabas' goodness is expressed earlier in his generosity to the church in chapter 4.

Also, in him sticking his neck out to commend Paul as an apostle to the apostles in Jerusalem in chapter 9. But here we find something even more beautiful about Barnabas.

[20 : 05] Because Barnabas would very soon yield his preeminence to Paul. Barnabas was older. More respected.

And in many ways more experienced than Paul. But when he asked Paul to come to help in Antioch in verse 25. And when they later commenced a missionary journey together in chapter 13.

Paul began at that point to play a greater role. Chapter 11 here begins with Barnabas and Saul. Paul. But then it very quickly became Paul and Barnabas.

And it stayed that way to the end. Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas to Paul was like John the Baptist to Christ. He must become greater that I might become less.

It wasn't because Barnabas had his turn. It's not because, well, Barnabas, I'm now old. I'm looking for retirement. I've contributed my bit. I need to step aside and let the younger generation. It's not that at all.

[21 : 15] What I see here is strategy and humility. In Acts 9 we read of the miraculous conversion of the apostle Paul.

Saul. God then says this about Paul in verse 15. This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings.

At the end of chapter 9, Barnabas is the one who takes Paul to the apostles so that he can tell them all that God has done for him and what he has been doing for God.

Barnabas must have known that Paul's calling is to be an apostle of the Gentiles. And so here's Barnabas in Antioch.

Seven to eight years later, after Paul's conversion, seven to eight. So we read chapter 9 and we jump to chapter 11. We just think it's, well, it's the following week.

[22 : 21] Now there's seven to eight years of discipleship that's happened to Paul here. With all these Gentile conversions in Antioch and he must have thought, Paul, this is Paul's job.

Barnabas could have thought, well, this is my opportunity to get out from under the wings of the church in Jerusalem. Be my main man at Antioch. He says this is Paul's domain.

This is what Paul's been commissioned to do. It would appear that Barnabas puts his ego to one side, allows Paul to rise over him for the sake of the word of God increasing and spreading.

Aren't we glad as we sit here today in this Gentile church? For the humility of the man like Barnabas. It's a glimpse of real partnership, of sacrificial leadership and of godly character.

When Paul traveled with Barnabas to heathen Antioch, they were the dynamic duo, sort of like Batman and Robin kind of thing. They complemented one another beautifully.

[23 : 30] Not that I'm sure how Robert compliments Batman, but they complemented one another beautifully. Thanks to the expert orchestration of the Holy Spirit.

Barnabas was sensitive, empathetic, gracious. Paul had the brilliant, honed, razor sharp lawyer's instinct and intellect.

And together with the Spirit's power working through them, they were unconquerable. But what stands out here in this moment is character.

The character, the humble servant attitude of Barnabas saw this church grow. Our society values power, the church values humility.

The advance of the kingdom of God will continue to be severely compromised in our era if the church attempts to wield institutional, positional power rather than taking a posture of humility and service of all people.

[24 : 42] Our core value here at St. Paul's of humble authenticity must define the character of this church into the future. From senior leadership all the way through.

So friends, is there pride, positional power, influence that you are confident of that needs to be confessed? Is there a sinner pride that needs to be confessed?

Fourthly, this church has a commitment to emulate the radical generosity of Jesus. Have a look, 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 a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. That means Antioch as well.

This happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

[25 : 46] This they did, sending them a gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. The severe famine would impact Antioch as well.

In the same way that a depression, recession impacts the church is the way it impacts the society. We're all in the same boat.

But this church at Antioch saw a need and decided to help. They gave to the need, each according to his ability, it says. Generosity is a plain biblical principle.

All of life generosity is so basic to the Christian life because God's generosity to us in the Lord Jesus Christ in sacrificing himself for our life is central to the Christian life.

2 Corinthians 8 puts it like this. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sake, for our sake, he became poor so that you, us, through his poverty might become rich.

[26 : 54] That's the gospel in economic terms. And what flows out from that is a life of radical generosity, even as we feel the pinch.

Jesus took our sin and he gave us his righteousness. From the very beginning of this church in Acts chapter 2, we see a life of radical generosity. When the gospel hits town, generosity is what flows over as an instinctive response to the grace of the Lord Jesus.

And so we need to see the opportunity that God has given us in the wealthy West to meet needs and to demonstrate the character of a radically generous God.

Even as we face economic uncertainty in the future as a society and as a church, we get to show our world that we do not live for what they live for.

We've got a greater hope. Something more important to worth treasuring. So this church proclaimed the good news of Jesus.

[28 : 03] It grew together in Jesus, was transformed in character by Jesus and was radically generous like Jesus. This simply means that they were wholehearted disciples of Jesus and they changed the world.

How do I know that? How do I know they changed the world? One of the most wonderful and heartwarming and almost throwaway statements in this passage serves, if you like, as an overarching statement that describes the impact of the church of Antioch.

It's found at the end of verse 26. In the first century, the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

In the first century, Antioch was a melting pot of, at the very least, five different cultures.

People came from as far as way as China to live in what was known as the Las Vegas of the Roman Empire.

[29 : 20] That's Antioch. It was known for its chariot races, betting on chariot races, its deliberate pursuit of pleasure. Antioch was most famous for its worship of the Greek god Daphne.

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

Throughout the whole world, the whole Roman Empire at that time, the term, the morals of Daphne was a euphemism for depravity.

Antioch was a city of sensuality and depravity. And pagans in Antioch discovered that Jesus was better, more satisfying, more fulfilling.

He offered life and salvation. And so this church at Antioch was like a flower growing in a putrid bog. A patch of grass growing in a wasteland.

[30 : 45] A gospel vitality had burned in the sensual, depraved, materialistic, spiritual darkness of Antioch.

It had burnt its way in there. This was so foreign, so foreign to this bleak environment that it altered the vocabulary of the city.

And from there, the entire world. When God's people live for Christ in such depth and such power, that those around them have to come up with a new name to describe what it is that they're witnessing.

What do you call that? What do you call that? Awesome. Now perhaps there was a jesting to it.

Perhaps there's a mocking edge to the nickname. Perhaps even a little bit of rage associated with it and disappointment. Because these people were such a contradiction to the ethos of Antioch.

[31 : 58] The new term. It's part Greek. It's part Latin. It was a mongrel name. Christian. Christian. Christian. Christian.

Christian. Christian. Followers of Christ. Christ was so much on the lips of these believers.

They lived so much as Christ lived. They identified so much with his character. What else do you call them? Alexander the Great once learned that in his army was another Alexander who was a notorious coward.

Alexander who you would probably know conquered the world at 23. called this soldier before him and said of him, asked of him, is your name Alexander?

And are you named after me? And the trembling coward in front of him said, yes, sir, my name is Alexander. And yes, I am named after you.

[33 : 15] And the great general then said, well, either be brave or change your name. As we launch into the future, my deep commitment is for us to emulate the Mother's Church's vision.

It's passion. It's commitment to display the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as we hold out the Christian gospel through lives which are captivated and transformed by Jesus. That is, that we would become an intentional discipling church that builds disciples for the glory of Jesus Christ.

People who follow Christ. So let me get realistic for a moment here. Where's the power to make this change?

Really briefly, right now many churches and Christians are feeling quite powerful. While it's in this age. Many Christians are struggling to see any change in themselves. Some of us are dealing with sin that we just got comfortable with for the last 30 or 40 years.

Struggling with even to be with the discipline to even read the Bible and to pray. To get to church. To even deal with relational problems and conflict and all sorts of stuff.

[34 : 34] We just feel defeated. So how on earth will a church like St. Paul's ever change the world when it appears that we're losing so much ground on so many different fronts?

Well, first of all, many global leaders, as I mentioned, are suggesting it's because there has been such a massive lack of emphasis in the Western church on intentional discipleship.

People have become Christians through whatever means. People have slipped into the church, become part of the furniture, never been taught to read the Bible, never been taught how to confess sin, never been taught how to pray, never been taught the fundamentals of the gospel, theology or correction in terms of life issues.

Never been taught how to pass the Bible, never been taught how to confess the Bible, never quit just a few days. Never been equipped to serve. They've just slipped in and become part of the furniture. Intentional discipling has dropped off. Now, regardless of whatever the issue might be, Acts 12 is helpful for us.

Now, this is not Antioch. We're not in Antioch anymore, but it's the same world. It's the same empire. And it's been a pattern for the church as the gospel has continued to spread. The church has faced consistently setbacks.

[36 : 01] It has felt weak. It has become weak. And chapter 12 is just another one of those moments. James, one of the closest disciples of Jesus, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, is executed.

He's now dead. The apostle Peter is in prison. He is waiting for his execution as well. And in verse 5, we read the church was earnestly praying for Peter.

And chapter 12 is a contrast between Herod's political authority, the power of the state, and God's sovereign control over all things. James was powerless.

Peter was powerless. The church felt powerless. But Herod felt very powerful and in control. And the end of it, we see Peter is miraculously released from prison.

Herod is struck down dead. It's a wonderful word of play. I'd love to go into this a little bit further. wordplay happening in chapter 12. The angel came to Peter in the prison and struck him.

[37 : 07] Woke him up and led him out to freedom. The angel came to Herod and struck him. And he died.

Peter is miraculously released from prison on the back of the church's prayer.

And he turns up to their front door. They're praying. And they're like, well, that can't be right. It's not a glorious scene of victory here.

They're surprised that he's been released, even though they're praying. Apparently, God has mercifully answered unbelieving prayer.

God is not bound by our imperfection and our weakness in advancing his kingdom. God is not bound by our imperfection and our weakness in the world.

[38 : 30] God will win. Lives will always be changed. And God will always be glorified. And you might be sitting here now.

And you might have gone through this series of acts. And you might be watching on screen through this series of acts. And I want to continue to echo the words we've heard consistently throughout this message. You cannot kick against the goads.

You must surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. He will always win. The gospel will win either in your life or in your death.

The gospel will win. So come to Jesus and surrender completely to him. Some of us, I think, as we look to the future, need to be reacquainted with our position and our power in the Lord Jesus.

Maybe for some of us, once dearly held realities as we first came to Christ have faded. Maybe the false values of the dreams of our society that have caused us to ease our grasp of spiritual realities and the hope and the passion and the commitment that we once had of Jesus and in Jesus.

[39 : 48] We need to go back. We need to rediscover our starting point in Jesus and make deliberate steps to grow as Christians.

Followers of Christ. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, help us to be loyal, brave, committed followers of Christ who refuse, refuse to turn back.

Who dare to stand firm and to make Christ's name known to all around us. Who desire with your divine enabling to shine the light of the glory of Christ in a dark world.

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

Followers of Christ. So we ask you now to open up to us as your church, St. Paul's, new horizons of your expansive purposes in this world.

[41 : 09] Save people and build your church. In Jesus' name. Amen.