

So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Acts 11.26.

After the high drama of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to arrest Christians in Damascus, and the hugely significant encounter between Peter the Jew and Cornelius the Gentile centurion, our passage today in *Acts* seems rather tame. It's about the daily goings-on of Christians in Antioch. But even that is interesting, because we read in v26 that it was here in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch that the followers of the Lord Jesus were first called 'Christians'. Perhaps that was originally a term of abuse, like 'Methodist' 1700 years later or 'Old Contemptibles', but which became a badge of pride. We're also reminded in this passage of something we have largely forgotten in today's church, that rich Christians help poor Christians. Vv27-28 tell us that there was a severe famine in the land ... How did they cope in the days of no welfare state? They helped each other, vv29-30... How the world would have noticed us Christians if we had stuck to that! To my knowledge, the Amish are the only people who still live like this. They have no pension schemes, and no insurance, because they don't need them. They have such a sense of community that the young look after their old. When someone's barn burns down, the neighbours build a new one.

We also read of terrific growth in the Antioch church, particularly now that the gates have been opened to Gentiles. Unlike Jerusalem, Antioch was a Gentile city, the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire. Look at the growth, vv20-21... and v24... You see, it's all in this book. If you want your church

to grow, make Jesus not trendy 'issues' your focus, v20...

But what is *really* explosive is this passage about the Antioch church is to be found in vv25-26... So Osama bin Laden has been converted to Christianity, and now he's in our church teaching us! How would you feel? Was it a trick, a plant? Would you *trust* him? Not only was Antioch the first place where people were called Christians; it was also the place where the great St Paul who did more than anyone to explain the Gospel and to extend the Church began his ministry.

I would like you to notice what it was that Paul and Barnabas actually *did*. They *taught* people. There are various ways you can get your message across. You can brainwash people, or use propaganda, spin, and half-truths. You can force people at the point of a sword. Today and in recent history we have seen how people have been converted to a cause by creating a climate of fear. The guillotines of the French Revolution, Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung all spring to mind. In our own society we all know the enormous force of social pressure to make us all think 'correctly'. It's called Political Correctnes. It's deadly and should be resisted.

But this is not how Paul operated. V26 tells us that for a whole year Paul *taught* great numbers of people. Proper teaching is not propaganda or ramming a party line down people's throats. *True* teaching is about getting people to *think*. Teaching is about rational discourse, the teacher helping pupils to see things for themselves. There is nothing more satisfying for a teacher than to see a light go on in a pupil's mind; to see the penny drop. 'Ah, I see it now!'

And we actually *know* how Paul taught because we have his letters, the 'Epistles of St Paul' in the NT. Read through *Romans*, and you will see a brilliant mind, not simply making assertions and ridiculing his opponents, but building up his argument, step by step in logical progression. Read *Galatians* and the two letters to the *Corinthians*. He takes their views and step by step logically and calmly shews where they are mistaken. Always Paul is courteous and concerned for their welfare. He never abuses his opponents.

Anyway, what's the *point* of abusing one's opponents? The whole purpose of Paul's teaching is to bring people into a personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus. That is the whole point of Christianity. It is for each of us to know the Lord Jesus personally, and you can't *force* people into that. You can't *force* someone to love another person. My prayer for each of you is that you be brought into a relationship with Jesus Christ; that you know him as the Lord of your life, and your Saviour who died for your sins. I don't want you to love *church*, but to know and love *Jesus*. You can't be *forced* into that by frightening you, by the point of a sword, or even by relentless logic. We can only be persuaded by love. That's why Paul gently and patiently taught for a whole year.

But what was it that Paul *taught*? He didn't spout his personal views on politics or issues of the day. He taught the *Bible*. Again we know this, because we see in his letters how he builds all his arguments on scripture, not on his own opinions or worldly trendy thought. Paul's method is very

timely because today, of course, is Bible Sunday. The 2nd

Sunday in Advent has that famous Prayer Book collect:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them.

That prayer this Bible Sunday, and Paul's example in Antioch are a reminder to us to get back to our Bible. The Church as a whole has to get back to God's Word and away from the personal notions and fads of parsons. Individual members of the church need to get back into the habit of daily Bible reading. When was the last time you read your Bible at home? It is shocking how ignorant people in the pew are of the Bible.

But I think our whole society needs to get back to the Bible. Paul, we read, *taught* the people, from the Bible. It really worries me what our people, especially our children, are being taught. It seems to me to be a diet of garbage from the TV and weird music. We are taught this idiotic idea that you can have it all, and be anything you want. Just watch *The Apprentice*, *X Factor*, and *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*. It's now compulsory that six-year olds have sex education, but the teaching of the Bible is banned in schools. Sick or what? Do you *still* doubt that the devil is taking over?

The only way we can resist this is to get back to the Word. Paul in *Ephesians* 6.11 says: 'put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes'. Our weapon, Paul tells us is not an *earthly* weapon, but God's *Word*, which is the 'sword of the Spirit'. Appalling things are happening in our society, but we can win, *if* we follow Paul and get back into the Word of God.