

The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to ill-treat them and stone them. Acts 14.4.

So Paul and Barnabas continue on their first missionary journey to Cyprus and now to Turkey. When he preached Jesus in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch there was a mixed reaction. It simply isn't true that all Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah. Wasn't Paul a Jew? Peter and the first disciples? Look at Acts 13.42-43 on p1108 ... And when Paul and Barnabas went on to Iconium they once again preached first in the synagogue, out of respect because the Jews were God's chosen people. And again a great number of Jews (and Gentiles) believed in Jesus, 14.1... We should never assume that because people already have a religion, it is wrong and offensive for us to tell them about Jesus. These accounts in Acts tell us that many Jews (and pagan Romans) were *glad* to hear about Christ. Ask a friend to church; they might be glad you asked.

But what these accounts of Paul's teaching also shew is how *divided* people were about Jesus. We've wondered about this before. Why throughout history have people been so bitterly divided about Jesus? It all seems to be about this 'Jesus is Lord' thing. The trouble, we found, is that there are other bodies who *also* want to be Lord. The *State* wants complete control. *Individuals* want complete control; they don't want others telling them what to do. Do *you*? But if I accept that *Jesus* is Lord, then I have to change my life. There are certain things I like doing at the moment that I will have to stop doing, if *Jesus* is in control of my life. So people are *bound* to resist Jesus's outrageous claim on their lives.

Can we turn to some words of Jesus himself at *John* 15 on p1083, at vv18-20a... ? They hated Jesus, because his claim to lordship threatened them. So they crucified him. And since we Christians, the Church, are his *body*, representing Christ and his claim to lordship in the world today, we can expect to feel the same hatred from the world that *he* felt.

They rejected and murdered Jesus. They rejected *Paul* as he preached Jesus and tried to kill him also. Let's go back to *Acts* 14 on p1109, to Paul preaching in Iconium. Look at v5... and if you read ahead in v19, you can see how they pursued Paul to Lystra where they *did* actually stone him very nearly to death ...

I don't know about you, but I can cope with death and loss and pain, but I can't deal with *hatred*. You may have experienced times when people just twist everything you say and use it against you, turning others against you. There's nothing you have done to deserve it, but sometimes people are just nasty and spiteful. That was certainly the experience of Jesus himself. What harm had *he* ever done? He was full of love and compassion for people, even for outsiders like lepers, Samaritans, fallen women. All he ever wanted to do was to help them and give them another chance. So why the hatred?

And wasn't Paul the same? He didn't come into these towns preaching Jesus at the point of a sword. He didn't threaten people and scare the life out of them. As I have said, he actually treated his fellow Jews with deep respect, because they were God's chosen people. He always preached in the synagogue first, bringing not a new religion, but Jesus as the

fulfilment of everything the OT said. And if you read his sermons in *Acts* or his various letters he never makes wild assertions. He is always calm and rational. He takes the OT scripture and actually *argues* his case. This is in marked contrast to many religious charlatans who simply make desperate claims and try to trick the people. Read Paul's letters and he always treats his readers with respect and courtesy. He wants them to see it for themselves.

Well, we've already examined why people's vested interests make them resist Jesus as Saviour and Lord. I want us to consider today how in fact Paul reacted to the violent way people rejected him; how Jesus himself reacted to those who so viciously rejected him, for I believe that *here* is to be found the essence of being a Christian.

The authorities lied about Jesus, and had him cruelly killed on trumped-up charges. How did Jesus react? By cursing them to hell? No! By praying for them in that famous prayer, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

And here we have Paul being plotted against by those who would stone him to death, *Acts* 14.5... As I said, in v19 they very nearly succeeded. What desperate men they were actually to pursue him to the next city! If they truly believed that Paul was talking rubbish, what were they getting so wound up against? Why not just prove him wrong? I'm always suspicious of those who can only defend their position by shouting and bullying their opponents. Such people are not as sure of themselves as they make out.

Anyway, how did Paul react to this insane hostility? Like Jesus, it was not with counter-threats of 'I'll get you; just you wait.' He simply went calmly on his way to the next town.

Can we come back to our other reading from *Romans* 12. It's on p1139, from v9 onwards. It's a famous passage Paul wrote about love. Take time this afternoon to read it again. Look at v14 ... 'Bless those who persecute you'. And v17... 'Do not repay evil for evil', and v19... 'Do not take revenge'.

Paul is not writing this from some country rectory where God's in his heaven and all's well with the world. He is writing this after being beaten up by thugs who want to kill him! He is experiencing violent rejection and real hatred, and yet he can urge fellow believers to love their enemies.

You know, this is Christianity at its absolute best. 'Love your enemies', Jesus said. 'Pray for those who persecute you'. And they *did* persecute Jesus and he *did* still love them and pray for their forgiveness. So did Paul. It's a tragedy that for so much of our church history we ignored this precious teaching which the world so badly needs. NI still needs it. So does Israel, the Middle East, Pakistan and India. Offices, even families. We need love to be poured into where there is hate, forgiveness where there is only revenge.

But why can Paul have such love for those who wanted him silenced and dead? How can we love those who hate us? Because Paul knew that God is on the throne, and one day he will sort out all the injustices and the wrongs. *Romans* 12.19-21... God is on the throne. Jesus is Lord. Leave it to him. He is a God of justice and he knows. You just get on and live a life of love.