

CHRISTIANS

Acts 11:19-30

1 Peter 4:12-19

There always seems to be some crisis or other going on in the world, to which we are urged to give money. Natural disasters follow hard upon each other: earthquakes in Pakistan, in Burma, in China; Tsunamis in the Indian Ocean, Hurricane Katrina and all her brothers and sisters, mud-slides in Ecuador and Peru, floods in Bangladesh, poor harvests in Africa. And there are the humanitarian crises caused by war and violence: ten years ago we were giving to help the people of Bosnia; since then it has been the people of Iraq and of Dafur. Now if we could we would give to the people of Zimbabwe. We are always being asked to give, and most of us give willingly what we can and wish it could be more. Pity moves us when we see the plight of the people.

But how many churches, I wonder, give before the event? How many churches say: there will be a disaster coming, so we should get ready to do what we can to meet it? That is what the church in Antioch did. They didn't know when the famine would come, but they set out in advance to make a collection to help the poorer Christians of Judea. That was what being followers of Jesus the Messiah was about: helping each other; holding all things in common to be used where there was going to be need. It was because people watched and saw that following the Christ meant that they did such things that they were given the nickname "Christians." But that's the end of the story. When the first believers came to Antioch they had no idea what they were about to start.

At the time they didn't realise what they were doing, that it wasn't what everyone else did. It just seemed natural to them. Maybe it was because although they were Jews they hadn't been born in the mother-land. In fact some of them hadn't been born as Jews at all: they'd made a conversion as adults and been baptised as Hellenistic Jews. Later they were baptised again, as followers of Jesus, as Believers. That was what they called themselves: Believers, or followers of The Way. They believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

They must have heard about Jesus in Jerusalem. It would have been almost ironic, really. Every good Jew wanted to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, and so these ones had made the journey, over sea and land from Cyprus and from Cyrene - which was in North Africa. And with that being a bit of an effort, they wouldn't go straight home afterwards. They would stay, some with family to meet, some keen to see the sights, visit the places where David had lived, where Elijah had ministered, glad to worship in the Temple on a regular basis. So they were still around for the feast of Pentecost, and it would be then that they heard about Jesus; his death and resurrection first of all, later, more about his life and teaching. And so they became Believers, followers of the Way, and they stayed around to learn more and simply to share in the excitement of this new and growing movement. But then Stephen was stoned and things turned nasty. Jerusalem Christians began to think of visits to far-flung family they should make, and the foreign visitors knew it was time to return home.

Still, they had learned enough to want to pass it on to others. That was what Believers did. What they didn't know was that everyone else told only native born Jews or Jewish converts. They told people who had a background in Scripture and prophecy and Law.

These ones spoke to everyone. Why not? Their homes were among Greek Cyprians, Greek-speaking Cyrenians. They knew that the puzzles and confusions, the needs and desires that had filled their lives filled the lives of their neighbours as well. They knew things which perhaps eluded those who held that to be Jewish was to be special: that everyone had unfilled places in life which only God's love can satisfy. And they knew too that satisfaction hadn't been found in the Jewish Law but in following Jesus and the Messiah, the Christ. They had good news to share: of course they talked!

They had no idea what they were starting! They had no idea that this was something very new: that Peter himself had needed visions and lots of reassurance from God before he would talk about Jesus to out and out foreigners. They had no idea that they were breaking church laws.

OK in those days church laws were unwritten, but aye-beens can grow up very quickly, and it had aye been that people of the Jewish faith were the ones who were invited to follow Jesus.

And so central church took a hand. When the Christians at Antioch heard that Jerusalem were sending someone down to see what was going on, I wonder what they thought? Later this Autumn we will have the usual five-yearly visit from representatives of the Presbytery, and some of us might get nervous about that. In other denominations with which I've been involved at times, interest from the Bishop was often seen as something best avoided. We so often tend to equate interest from larger church bodies with problems. I wonder if the Jerusalem church sent a letter to say that he was coming or if Barnabas just turned up one day?

The Presbytery, you might say, sent an inspector, the General Assembly sent an inquisitor. The Bishop sent a personal representative. But no. The mother church sent their best man for the task of encouraging the new Christians. They sent Barnabas. His real name was Joseph, but they had called him Barnabas (Son-of-Encouragement) because it described him so well. They sent someone who was humble and good, full of faith and with vision enough to see God at work: they sent someone who came from the same background as these excited missionaries and their new converts: he was from Cyprus himself. Barnabas came, not with words of caution, nor with a reprimand. He came, he saw and he rejoiced. And instead of going back to report, he stayed to join in this new church, to help and encourage.

He didn't make it Barnabas' Church, though. He did what he could and then he thought of someone who could maybe do more: though no one knew yet what he could do, because the Jerusalem church didn't trust him. Barnabas trusted him, though and so he set out and fetched Saul, and together they built up the church: not their church; Christ's church.

Obviously the name of Christ was always on their lips, because the Greeks among whom they lived and worked gave the believers a nickname: Christianoi, Christians. They didn't call themselves that: they were Believers, Followers of the Way. The Jews could never have given them this nickname, because that would have implied acceptance the Jesus really was the Messiah. And it didn't mean they liked or trusted them; just that they could tell that this Christ was the moving force, the most important thing about the church. In much the same way, in the 1970s and 80s the group which styled itself the Unification Church was known far and wide as the Moonies - after Sun Yung Moon, its founder and leader.

We only find the term Christian 3 times in the whole Bible. This is the first time - obviously: it is the first time the name is given. Later, following part of what we read last Sunday evening, King Herod Agrippa says to Paul: "Almost you persuade me to be a Christian." Again you can hear the slight derision in his voice. And then we find it in Peter's first letter, as we read this morning. Here again it is obviously a term of abuse. In the eyes of the world it is ranked with being a murderer, a thief, a criminal or a mischief maker. The world would add "Christian" to the list. It was something you might be accused of, something you might suffer for. But that, says Peter, is not a disgrace.

They were Christ's ones, they were Messiah-ists. They were not Barnabas - ians or Paul-ists or Peter-ites. In all they said and did Christ was the obvious centre, and if the world saw that and acknowledged it, even if they mocked, the believers could and should glory: it meant that they were getting something right.

So with the Antioch Christians. This offering which they took up to send to Judea was just one example. Antioch was a large trading city, the third city of the empire after Rome and Alexandria, and the people there would be less affected by famine, since they traded for their food. But many of the Judeans lived on a more subsistence level, and failure of a harvest would have an immediate effect. So the City Christians gave what they could. That was what Jesus the Christ would have wanted: he said "Love one another," after all. He said "Love your neighbour as yourself." He said, "Do to others what you would like them to do for you."

In our day there are two terms that are sometimes applied: "Bible Bashers" and "Jesus-freaks". I hope I am not a Bible basher, thumping people with texts to force a point of view. But I hope I am a Jesus-freak. I remember that when I was a candidate for ministry in the Presbytery of Chicago I had to prepare a statement of personal faith, and when it was presented to a committee they said it was too Christ-centred. They meant that there were some things I had not said enough about - like how I saw the Bible: but I have never seen how you can be too Christ centred. Barnabas and Saul and Peter could never get enough of being Christ centred.

We Jesus freaks will hold him at the centre of our lives, applying his teaching in every situation, giving him the praise and honour, not claiming any for ourselves. If people look at us, is "Christian - Jesus-ite" the name that comes first to mind? If so, then praise God for it. If not, then there is work to be done.