

Acts 17.10-15: STUDENTS IN BEREIA ENCOUNTER THE GOOD NEWS
[Chelmsford 11 July 2010]

As all of you can no doubt testify, preachers can be incredibly boring – the sermon been described as "*a monstrous monologue by a moron to mutes*".

Preachers can also be remarkably ineffective. One American research project discovered that immediately following the worship service, fewer than one-third of the people tested could give a reasonably clear statement of what the sermon was all about.

But what else would we put in the place of preaching? How else would the Gospel be communicated? Discussion groups can never take the place of preaching. For ultimately the Gospel is about news, and not views. As far as the Bible is concerned the preacher is God's herald, who proclaims the great acts of God in Christ. The fact is that there is a place for "one way" communication. One thing for certain: churches that are growing today are churches where preaching and teaching are taken seriously.

With these thoughts in mind let's look at the occasion when the Gospel came to Berea – a town today known as Verria.

Verria today is a busy town in Northern Greece – but it's not a place you would ever make an effort to visit.

The same was true of ancient Berea. A regional centre for one of the districts of the province of Macedonia, it was not as significant as Philippi - let alone Thessalonica, Athens & Corinth. According to Cicero it was "off the beaten track" (Cicero).

It was a second-rate town situated on a second-rate road, some 50 miles south west of Thessalonica.

And yet today it is famous for one thing: it was there in particular that people paid attention to Paul's preaching. I'm told that if you visit Verria today you'll see in the centre of the town a large monument marking the spot where Paul was supposed to have preached the Gospel to its inhabitants.

This morning let's look at Paul the model preacher – and the Bereans, the model congregation.

1. PAUL PREACHED GOD'S WORD

Luke tells us that when he came to Berea, "**Paul preached the Word of God**" (v13).

In one sense there was nothing unusual about Paul preaching the Gospel. Preaching was his passion, preaching was his life, preaching was his God-given calling.

As he wrote to the church at Corinth: "**I have no right to boast just because I preach the gospel! After all, I am under orders to do so. And how terrible it would be for me if I did not preach the gospel!**" (1 Cor 9.16). Paul just had to preach.

However, Paul wasn't into preaching for preaching's sake.

Paul preached, because he longed to see men and women won for Christ.

It was this desire to win men and women for Christ that caused him to travel so widely. As he wrote to the church at Rome: “**My ambition has always been to proclaim the Good News in places where Christ has not been heard of**” (Rom 15.20). And so he came to Berea.

There **Paul preached the Word of God**

The REB speaks of the Word of God being “**proclaimed**” by Paul. Paul didn’t simply talk about Jesus. He was a man with a message. According to my Greek dictionary (TDNT) the underlying Gk word (*katagello*) which Luke uses has the “*the thought of solemn proclamation uppermost*”. As we saw last week, at Thessalonica Paul was very happy to enter into dialogue with people about Jesus – we read in Acts 17.2 that “**during three Sabbaths he held discussions with the people**”. But Paul was far more than a discussion group leader. Paul was a preacher. As he put it when writing to the church at Corinth, he was an “**ambassador for Christ**” (2 Cor 5.19) – he had a message to proclaim.

“**Paul preached the Word of God**”.

As the context makes clear, Paul preached the Word of God from the Scriptures. Indeed, we often speak of the Scriptures as being the Word of God – or rather, we speak of the Scriptures as being the Word of God in written form. The Scriptures are not literally the Word of God – in the sense that God did not directly dictate his Word to a prophet, evangelist or apostle. Rather God spoke his Word through men and women: as Peter put it in his Second Letter, “**people were under the control of the Holy Spirit as they spoke the message that came from God**” (2 Pet 1.21). The Scriptures inevitably reflect the personalities of those through whom God spoke. The Scriptures, if you like, betray a double authorship – human and divine; just as indeed Jesus, the Living Word of God, was both human and divine.

“**Paul preached the Word of God**” from the Scriptures

The Scriptures in question were, of course, the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul came to Berea around 36 AD – at that stage he had written none of his so-called Epistles; as for the Gospels, the earliest of them was not written until around 65 AD. The teaching of Jesus was still being handed down by word of mouth, and so too were the stories of his life, death and resurrection. So when it came to preaching about Jesus from the Scriptures, Paul will have used the OT and will have shown how passages like Is 53 and Ps 16 point to Jesus. That was his approach in Thessalonica, for instance. Luke tells us that “**there during three Sabbaths he held discussions with the people, quoting & explaining the Scriptures and proving from them that the Messiah had to suffer & rise from death**” (17.2,3).

This too was surely his approach in Berea.

Our situation today is very different – not least, thank God, because we have the Gospels & the Letters, as also the Acts & the Book of Revelation. And yet, for all the differences, I find myself challenged by the statement that “**Paul preached the Word of God**”.

It reminds me in turn that my calling is to preach the Word of God too. As a Christian minister, I have many roles – but a principal role is to be a preacher.

As a pastor my key task is to feed the flock God has entrusted to me. The preaching of the Word of God must be at the heart our church life. In the words of John Calvin; *“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, there a church of God exists, even if it swarms with many faults”!*

How in practice is the Word of God purely preached & heard? When the church engages in & listens to ‘expository preaching’.

- For preachers this means that they preach the kind of sermons which seek to explain and unpack the Word of God. We are not in the business of sharing our opinions on the state of the world – yes, our preaching has to relate to the world in which we live – but our preaching needs to be Bible-driven and Bible-centred.
- The church in turn should encourage such expository preaching by taking the Scriptures seriously themselves – in practical terms this means bringing along Bibles to church so that they can understand more clearly what the preacher is getting at.

2. THE BEREANS STUDIED GOD’S WORD

“The people there were more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica. They listened to the message with great eagerness, and every day they studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true” (v11)

What a wonderful congregation this was!

Luke tells us that the Bereans were **“more open-minded”** (GNB); **“more receptive”** (NRSV) than the people in Thessalonica..

Literally, they were **“more noble-minded”** (NIV) – the underlying Greek word comes from a word indicating noble birth – but then it was used to refer to people who acted nobly & graciously. The implication is that well-mannered people are prepared to put aside their prejudices and listen to what the speaker has to say!

But they were more than open-minded – they received Paul’s message **“with great eagerness”** (GNB/NIV: NRSV = **“very eagerly”**), **“with enthusiasm”** (Peterson)!

What a wonderful congregation to have!

My mind goes to the occasion when Cornelius asked Peter to come and preach to his friends: **“Now we are all here in the presence of God, waiting to hear anything that the Lord has instructed you to say”** (Acts 10.33). No wonder the Holy Spirit fell on the congregation before Peter had finished. They certainly knew how to listen to the Word of God! So too did the Bereans.

But they were more than good listeners. They followed up Paul’s preaching by actually studying the Scriptures for themselves: indeed, Luke tells us that **“every day they studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true”**.

This wasn’t a one day a week job – nor did they supplement the Sabbath preaching with a mid-week small group – no: **“every day”** they studied the Scriptures.

They really were keen.

Different translations use different synonyms for describing this study

The AV says that they “**searched the Scriptures daily**”. You can just imagine them going through their OT scrolls with a fine toothcomb, hunting high and low for references to Jesus.

Other translations say that they “**examined**” the Scriptures daily (NRSV/NIV): the underlying Greek word (*anakrino*) was used of judicial investigations: e.g. as of Herod examining Jesus, the Sanhedrin Peter & John (4.9) and Felix Paul (24.8).

- “*It implies integrity and lack of bias*” (Stott).
- In the words of a famous 18C German Lutheran scholar, Johann Albrecht Bengel: “*a characteristic of the true religion is that it suffers itself to be examined into, and its claims to be so decided upon*”

Again, our situation is very different.

We don’t have to hunt down references to Jesus in the Scriptures.

Nor for that matter, do we necessarily have to come together to do Bible Study – for remember that in those days, apart from the very wealthy, nobody would have a complete set of OT scrolls for themselves.

And yet there is a challenge for us all – not least when it comes to Bible reading.

How eager are we to reading the Scriptures?

The Bereans challenge us to read the Scriptures daily – and rightly so.

For reading the Bible on a daily basis does make a difference to our spiritual life. It gives direction, encouragement, & help of all kinds.

- ‘The Bible contains the vitamins for a healthy soul’
- ‘Dusty Bibles make for dirty lives’
- Thomas Merton: ‘By reading of Scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a purer, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills, and the whole world is charged with the glory of God’.

In a recent survey I read that only 1 in 7 British Christians read a Bible between one Sunday and another. Brothers and sisters, if you are not reading the Bible regularly, you are depriving yourselves of hearing God speak into your life.

But don’t just read the Bible – study it. Use Bible reading notes to understand it. Yes, do come and see me afterwards, and I would be more than happy to give you a sample copy of Bible reading notes

3. SOME WELCOMED, OTHERS RESISTED GOD’S WORD

As usual there was a mixed response to the Word of God.

On the positive side, there were some who welcomed God’s Word. Indeed, more than some. Luke writes; “**Many of them believed**” (v12). Notice, the implication is that they believed not as a result of any emotional pressure being put on them: rather their response was one based on intellectual conviction.

Luke goes on: “**and many Greek women of high social standing and many Greek men also believed**” (v12). One commentator asks: “*Is Luke bragging about Paul’s*

success in attracting influential people to the faith or is he marvelling that the Spirit is able to convert even people of 'high standing'?" (Willimon).

Although as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 1, the majority of his converts were from the lower classes, nonetheless right from the very beginning the Christian church attracted people from right across the social spectrum. This was in fact vital for the development of the Christian church: for apart from the homes of the wealthier members, there was no place otherwise for the church to meet.

Sadly, not all welcomed the Word of God. There were those who resisted God's Word. Look at Acts 17.13: **"When the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul had preached the word of God in Berea also, they came there and started exciting and stirring up the mob"**. The Jews who had opposed Paul in Thessalonica, now pursued him to Berea.

It is important that we realise that these Jews were not necessarily evil people – many were just misguided people. Barclay: *"The tragedy is that undoubtedly they thought that they were doing God's work by seeking to silence Paul. It can be a terrible thing when a man identifies his aims with the will of God instead of submitting his ways to that will"*

How true that is: people can be zealous in their commitment to God, but their zeal can be misplaced. Indeed, in Rom 10.1b, 2 Paul said this of his fellow Jews: **"How I pray to God for them! I can assure you that they are deeply devoted to God; but their devotion is not based on true knowledge"**

People – even Christian people – can be sincere, but also sincerely wrong.

To return to Berea: some believed & accepted God's Word – others, alas, resisted it. By God's grace, may we never be amongst those who resist God's Word – but rather be counted amongst those who receive it with the greatest of enthusiasm!

Let us too be a model congregation!