

SJM, 11th May

Only One Chance?

Acts 13 v13-25

Psalm 89 v1-2, 20-26

John 13 v16-20

The passage from Acts is right at the beginning of Paul's missionary work – in fact, towards the start of his first missionary journey.

Paul and Barnabas had been chosen by the Spirit, blessed and sent out by the church in Antioch. And they didn't waste any time proclaiming the gospel – v5, just before our reading begins, says, "When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of the Lord in the Jewish synagogues." Straight down to it - no excuses, no prevarication. It certainly had an effect - because at their next port of call they were actually *summoned* to the proconsul's house 'because he wanted to hear the word of God' v7. It was known that Paul and Barnabas stood for something, something new and something curiously attractive.

So at the beginning of our reading, what do they do? 'In Pisidian Antioch, on the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down' v14. Why?

A service in a synagogue usually followed this format: the men (the congregation that is) recited the Shema – 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!'; prayers were said; there was a reading from the law (Torah); a reading from the prophets (remember Jesus in the synagogue reading from Isaiah, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' Luke 4); and then a sermon. And it was customary for the synagogue leader to invite any visiting rabbis to speak. So Paul and Barnabas knew exactly

what was going to happen. They knew why they were there and they expected to be put on the spot. They were going to have to tell it like it is - the good news about the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for. And then wait for the response...

They had no need to go to the synagogue to worship. As Christians Paul and Barnabas could have worshiped anywhere but they deliberately chose to go to a place where they would be most, what? Effective, challenging, challenged, disturbing? And yes, often after one of these sermons, they were chased out of town – but at least they proclaimed the message. Perhaps their one and only chance.

But this time, if you read on a little in Acts (v42ff), you will see that, "as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next Sabbath. When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord." Now that's the way to do it!

So if you only get one opportunity to share the gospel, if you have to make the opportunity - make the most of it! Make opportunities and 'when they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.' And leave the seed in God's hands.