

Evensong 3rd August 2008-08

Trinity 11

Our readings tonight are to do with the transmission of the word of God. The Queen of Sheba travels up some 1,200 from the south to see Solomon and to learn about God from him.

She came to learn. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the little local church to go out and take the word of God with them.

Just a quick bit of background on our Old Testament reading. In the first four chapters of 1 Kings, we see Solomon establishing his rule as king over Israel. Remember, he wasn't the eldest son – he was David's son by Bathsheba, and naturally, the other brothers are, shall we say, a bit miffed. Solomon deals harshly all those who oppose his leadership. Then in chapters 5 through to 8, we see all the work involved in the building of God's temple. And how they used nothing less than the best materials money could buy. We can see all the trading relationships being built up with neighbouring countries.

I think the message of that for us today is that we should take the WORSHIP of God very seriously indeed. It was Solomon's first priority once he was established and not threatened. It is worth asking ourselves – and the church generally – *is* the Worship of God really our first priority?

Sheba, Seba, or Saba was a land in the part of the Arabian peninsula corresponding to modern Yemen. When they clashed with the Assyrian kings in the eighth century BC, the Sabeans were still ruled by queens. The visit by the queen of Sheba to the court of Solomon suggests that the Sabeans were already actively involved in trade along the caravan routes of the Arabian subcontinent in the tenth century BC.

Solomon left all the trading in the Mediterranean to the Phoenicians, but he did have a coastal fleet operating in the south – down to Africa and Arabia. These maritime activities in the south brought him to the attention of those who had their own trading interests in the region. Perhaps the visit of the Queen was in part to test whether she was

strong enough to tackle Solomon's influence in the waters round her kingdom. It is a possibility that has been suggested.

The Old Testament tells us simply that the queen comes to Jerusalem to test Solomon with hard questions. She had heard about his wealth and wisdom. She heard about his close relationship with this strange God that they worshipped – the one they called “The One True God”. She heard about this God's hand of blessing on the nation of Israel. Not only did she bring her questions to Solomon. She brings him a splendid gift - spices and gold and precious stones. This is a reminder of the prophecy in Psalm 72:10, which says “The kings of distant shores will bring him tribute; the kings of Sheba will present him gifts.” The Magi from the East would bring their precious gifts into the presence of the future king of the Jews, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the ancient world, when you went into the presence of a great king, you made sure you brought with you a great gift. It was your way of saying that you want to be a blessing to the king just as much as you want Him to be a blessing to you. I wonder if we have the temerity to think that we – yes us here in Rothbury – can be a real blessing to God. And here we present ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice. Surely this is how we should come in to the presence of the King of all Kings.

So the queen brings King Solomon all these wonderful gifts. And while the servants are unpacking them, the queen opens up and talks with him about everything that's on her mind. You can call it determination. You can call it desperation. But the point is that this woman has gone WAY out of her way to get her questions answered. She has a great desire to learn from the king. And Jesus uses this episode to challenge us about our OWN desire to learn from the king. He says in Matthew 12:42, “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.” In effect Jesus says: “This Gentile woman was willing to go out of her way to listen to the wisdom of Solomon. Why aren't you willing to go a couple minutes out of your way to listen to MY wisdom? Something greater than Solomon is RIGHT HERE!!!”

So, the Queen came to learn about God from Solomon. But when the true importance of Jesus, the living word was realized, the first

Christians knew that this was too precious to keep to themselves.

Antioch on the Orontes, 16 navigable miles up the river from the coastal port of Selucia became the third city in importance after Rome and was the center of administration the Middle East. The Church was founded by men of Cyrene, and Lucius of Cyrene was one of the prophets and teachers by whom Barnabas and Saul were set apart for their mission.

The plan of a missionary campaign had probably already been discussed and approved, and that the whole Church was gathered together, fasting and praying for some definite word from the Holy Spirit, telling them where to go and whom to send. All eyes and hearts would be fixed upon the five prophets through whom the heavenly voice had so often made itself heard before. At last the word comes: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul."

Paul and Barnabas were ordained – there was a formal commissioning service – and they set off by ship to Cyprus, landing in a lovely cove which was where the harbour was at Paphos. In the few short verses in Acts we cover an enormous amount of ground. Sandra and I did the journey from Perga to the other, and bigger Antioch – Antioch in Pisidia. It is a full day's drive in a coach through several mountain passes. There were bears and wild boars, not to mention armed bands of robbers.

We saw the foundations of the synagogue in this second Antioch, which was to become the basilica church of St Paul a couple of centuries later. And it was to this synagogue that Paul first brought the word of the resurrection – the good news of Jesus Christ. And with great power the word of God took hold of people there and Pisidian Antioch became a great Christian Centre.

The Queen of Sheba traveled about 1,200 miles, no mean journey, to meet Solomon and to learn about God. Paul went to far greater lengths, and suffered all sorts of accidents and opposition in his work as Apostle to the Gentiles.

I think the point that comes home to me in the juxtaposition of the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba and the beginning of the first

missionary journey is this: we must never under-rate the importance of the truth that has been passed down to us.

The early church down by the river Orontes fasted and prayed over the Missionary project. What do we do to seek the will of God for us, as individuals, and a Christian Community? As a church we have a cursory opening prayer and then hold a PCC meeting. We never have prayer meetings. We don't even take Bible study as a church all that seriously.

As I write this sermon I feel that the Lord is challenging me, and I hope challenging his church here in this place, to take the gospel seriously. To make the worship of God our first priority, and to seek his will for us.