



Bible Study

May 13, 2015

Acts 13:13-24

John 6:5-14

Acts 13:13-24 (NKJV) -

Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.” Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it. Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.’ From this man’s seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus—after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.”

John 6:5-14 (NKJV) - Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. Philip answered Him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.” One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?” Then Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.” Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.”

Commentary -

The sermon which St. Paul begins in today's epistle reading from the Acts of the Apostles is the first sermon which he preached aimed at a Gentile audience. It is, however, aimed at a very particular audience of non-Jews at a very particular place. The city in which he preaches, Antioch in Pisidia, is not to be confused with Antioch in Syria, the latter of which being the place at which believers were first called Christians. The reason for the identical naming is that both cities were founded by Greek kings of the Seleucid dynasty, descended from one of the generals of Alexander the Great, Seleucus. Seleucus' father was named Antiochus, after whom he named his Syrian capitol, Antioch. This city in Pisidia to which St. Paul now comes was founded by Seleucus' son, also named Antiochus. After his father had established his fledgling empire's control of Asia Minor (the land that is now Turkey), Antiochus had to defend the territory from the Galatians, who invaded from Europe in the early- to mid- 3rd century BC. Antioch in Pisidia, or Pisidian Antioch, was founded by him atop a hill as a fortress and base of operations at a crossroads. After successfully holding off the Galatian advances, this Antiochus adopted the title Antiochus I Soter.

When St. Paul arrives in this, at his time Roman, city, he begins at the local synagogue. When he rises to speak after the Scripture readings, he addresses two groups. The first, of course, is the population of Judeans living in the city who form the backbone of the synagogue. The second group he addresses are the 'God-fearers'. This was, at this time in history, a technical term. Throughout the 1st century BC and most of the 1st century AD, until the beginning of the Jewish revolts, there was a popular fascination in the Roman world with the religion of Judea. The Romans knew that the beliefs of the Hebrew people were ancient, and they were exceedingly foreign to the pagan mindset, particularly in their monotheism. The sacrificial rites practiced at the Temple in Jerusalem were likewise foreign to those of Greco-Roman paganism, and therefore considered mysterious and exotic. Most of the Romans who held this fascination were not interested in fully entering into the religion, which would have required circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic Law regarding food, clothing, etc. These men and women, many of them wealthy, remained therefore around the fringes of the Judean communities scattered around the Empire, and would make gifts and endow synagogue building projects, represent the interests of Judean non-citizens (as the vast majority of them were not Roman citizens) in courts and government, and the like. They were an extremely valuable part of the local synagogue communities through their patronage, despite holding only peripheral membership in them.

Here in Pisidian Antioch, and throughout his ministry as the Apostle to the Gentiles, these God-fearers were the first and primary target of St. Paul's Gospel message. Though these men and women had not fully entered into religious life, they were in most cases learned in the Holy Scriptures and the traditions of the Judean people, sometimes even moreso than their Judean brothers and sisters. St. Paul fought continuously to ensure that those things which had until his mission been the primary obstacles to their coming to faith, circumcision and the precise strictures of the Mosaic Law, would not be set up as obstacles to these men and women coming to faith in Jesus Christ. St. Paul's message here in Antioch of Pisidia, and in many other cities, proved very popular among the God-fearers and they began to form new, Christian synagogues. The Judean people of these cities, however, seeing their benefactors and patrons abandon them to follow after St. Paul and Jesus Christ whom he taught, became enraged and sought to destroy the Apostle and end his mission.

St. Paul's sermon begins by summarizing the history of the nation of Israel, the nation with which and with whose history his audience has been so fascinated, namely the formation of that nation, first in the wilderness after the escape from Egypt, after which God sent judges, and finally a king, David, to rule over His people and nation. What St. Paul proclaims as the Gospel report is that God is again doing the same thing in their very day. A new people of God is being formed, first by St. John the Forerunner in the wilderness, setting apart a new nation to be ruled over by a new and greater King, Jesus. Notice that when he first mentions Him, St. Paul attributes to Jesus not the more common title

of Christ, but that of 'Savior' (in Greek 'Soter'). It is Jesus who is the true ruler and savior of the people, not Antiochus, his Seleucid successors, or Caesar.

While St. Paul's hearers were not there to experience the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, or her peak as a united nation under the rule of David, they are living in the time of the formation of God's new covenant people under the rule of Jesus the Christ. This new people, begun with a believing remnant of Israel, of whom St. Paul is himself one, is now open to every human person, Judean, Greek, Roman, or barbarian, who will believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized. The God of Israel, who worked such great wonders in ancient times, has now worked the greatest wonder of all in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on this earth, and inviting all to leave the rule of the dark powers and principalities that govern this world, who He defeated on His Cross, and come under the rule of the One, True, Living God Who loves mankind.

The very synagogue in which St. Paul preached this sermon became a Christian synagogue, and then a basilica was built upon it, and it became a cathedral church within the Byzantine Empire, the seat of the Metropolitan who oversaw the entirety of Pisidia and its environs. The new nation which St. Paul invited his hearers to join is no other Body than the Holy Orthodox Church, and those who embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ through his preaching are our direct ancestors in the Faith.

As the new people of God, we are on a journey, as we are reminded by today's Gospel reading. A journey that began when we left behind the Egypt of this world's worship of sinful pleasures, and our slavery thereto. A journey following Jesus Christ, who will ultimately lead us into His Kingdom. We now find ourselves in the wilderness, wanderers and aliens, not in our true home, but on the way there. Just as God gave manna, the bread from heaven, to His people Israel in the wilderness, so also He provides for us our daily bread as we sojourn in this life. This identity as the fulfillment of Israel, however, brings with it a warning as well as this promise. We are the people of God whom He has called out of this world to His Kingdom out of His overwhelming love and mercy toward every person, but we cannot forget the fate of the wilderness generation of the first Israel. Of that entire people who left Egypt, only two, Joshua and Caleb, the latter of whom was a Gentile adopted into Israel, entered into the Land of Promise. All of the others died in the wilderness as a result of ingratitude, grumbling, and above all, faithlessness.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us be faithful to Jesus, our Savior and King. Let us never forget, overlook, or fail to honor the great victory which He has won over the powers of sin and death and hell on our behalf, nor the tender, loving care which He showers upon us from the Kingdom of Heaven day and night. Let us remember our true citizenship, which is above, and remain faithful and true to Jesus Christ and His Church until that great day when He and His Kingdom come to stand here upon this Earth.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) In many cases, the 'God-fearers' knew the Holy Scriptures and the traditions of the Old Testament better than the people of Judea who had been born into that faith. Regardless of how you came to the Orthodox Faith, how well do you know your Tradition? If we don't have time for the Scriptures or to learn and practice our Faith, what does this say about how much we value it?
- 2) The blessings that the Lord pours out upon us every day, which sustain us through this life, are too many to be counted. How do you receive the blessings of the Lord? With thanks? Without any acknowledgment? With grumbling over what wasn't received? Do you secretly envy others who are outside of Christ and still slaves to the passions?
- 3) When the disciples saw only five small loaves of bread and two fish to feed more than five thousand people, they openly doubted. Despite all of the miracles which Jesus had worked before them, despite all He had begun to teach them, despite all of the prophecies regarding the

Christ from the Old Testament and all the wondrous works of God in those Scriptures, they did not believe that Jesus could feed all of the people. Do you find yourself worrying in your day to day life? Do you begin to doubt that Christ will truly care for your needs? Do you forget all of the wonders He has accomplished on your behalf already, and begin to think that some difficulty you face is beyond His power or beyond His compassion and mercy?

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