

Light in the darkness
Bible reading: Acts 13.44-14.7

*And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant ...
"It is too small a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the survivors of Israel:
I will give you as a light to the nations,
That my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."
Isiah 49.5-6, quoted by Paul in Acts 13.47.*

I stepped out onto the back step the other night and looked up at the stars. Is it my imagination, or are they shining more brightly than usual? The darkness seemed darker, but the little points of light seemed brighter than ever. We live in difficult and unpredictable times, when many of our normal ways of being human are closed to us. Yet there are many indications of light in the darkness. Rebecca Solnit, writing in yesterday's *Guardian*, says "The basic generosity and empathy of most ordinary people should be regarded as a treasure, a light and an energy source that can drive a better society, if it is recognised and encouraged."

Yesterday was St Matthias' day (14th May). Matthias was the 'twelfth man' chosen by the apostles to fill the vacancy left by Judas (Acts 1.15-26). He fitted all the job specifications perfectly — but we never hear any more about him.

Paul, on the other hand, didn't fit any of the job specs. He hadn't been a disciple 'from the beginning' — he'd never even met Jesus — he was full of zeal, but it was misdirected — he was raucous, pugnacious, too clever by half — and, when we first met him, obstinately opposed to the church. Definitely not apostle material. But maybe God had other ideas? Maybe God needed someone with just Paul's gifts to nudge the church in a new direction?

When we read Acts, we read it with the benefit of hindsight. We know how the story's going to end — in fact we know what's going to happen *after* the story ends, because we're part of the same story. We know that the message that Jesus entrusted to the apostles wasn't just for Israel — it was too important for that. We know that Jesus is good news for the whole world, a light for the nations. We know that today there are disciples of Jesus in every corner of the globe (in countries Peter and Paul had never even heard of), faithfully learning what it means to follow Jesus and seeking to shine God's light in the place where God has put us: "You in your small corner, and I in mine," as the old hymn puts it.

But the people *in* the story don't know all that. They have to start with the little bit of light they have, shining it into their corner, among the people they know. That's why Paul and Barnabas, as they set out on this new mission, started with the old centres, talking to people who understood their language, who'd read the same Bible, had the same past. And Paul never lost that vision. Writing to the Romans a few years later, he said, *I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans*

1.16). He never lost his sadness over Israel's rejection of his message: he keeps going back over it like a sore tooth (read especially Romans chs 9-11). And he never lost his conviction that eventually, in God's good time, all Israel would be saved (Romans 11.25-27).

But one door closing means another one opening. When your natural lines of communication are blocked, you have to think outside the box. The clue was there already in the Bible. Isaiah 49.6 was a favourite verse of Paul's — it helped him to think through where God was calling him when things seemed to be going wrong. Isaiah's prophecy was a message of hope and comfort for a people in exile, a promise of homecoming and restoration: *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people* (Isaiah 40.1ff). But the prophet who had glimpsed God's glory among the exiles couldn't be content with shutting up that light in a box: *It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the survivors of Israel. Enlarge your vision, God is saying — look around you at this whole bright, exciting, glorious world. It may be dark and dangerous in places — but it's still my world, the world I created and the world I love. I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*

Jesus said, *You are the light of the world: don't hide your light under a bushel!* (Matthew 5.14). Or in the words of the old hymn:

Jesus bids us shine, then, for all around:
Many kinds of darkness in this world abound.
Sin and want and sorrow, so we must shine —
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

God bless, Loveday.

PS: don't forget it's **Christian Aid Week!** We can't do an envelope collection this year, but we really need to reach out in compassion to our brothers and sisters struggling with the pandemic around the world. You can give directly on the Christian Aid website: just click on <https://www.christianaid.org.uk>