

Daniel's Sermon

21 March 2021

Big things have small beginnings. At the start of Scripture's epic narrative of salvation, God makes himself known to a lone Bronze Age individual from the ancient Sumerian city of Ur Kasdim on the Persian Gulf. This righteous man, Abram, is called, with his wife Sarai, to the land of Canaan to start a family that in three generations will be of a great number, in a few centuries a nation of wandering tribes, and in a few centuries more a mighty kingdom – God's covenant people, a chosen ethnic group descended from one man.

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This unified kingdom wasn't to last. It split in two. One fell to the Assyrians in 722BC, the other to the Babylonians in 587BC. After this, God's people were displaced and exiled, living afar among the pagan nations, and the few still in the promised land of Canaan were ruled by a succession of foreign dominions: Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, and finally, Romans. Yet, by the time of Christ, though Rome ruled the known world politically-speaking, the language, culture and ideas everywhere were still that of Greece.

The relationship between Greek culture and Judaism was interesting. In this morning's Gospel reading, some Greek-converts to Judaism tentatively approach the apostle Philip, asking if they might see Jesus; Philip then tells Andrew, and they both go together to tell Jesus. You can imagine their confusion and trepidation. Greeks... gentiles... foreigners... living, breathing symbols of one of the oppressive powers that'd once controlled the Jews.

They may have been coming to the festival to worship the same God as them, but they were still non-Jews, still outside the boundaries of God's covenanted people. The fact that Philip had to first explain the situation to Andrew before they both felt confident enough to go with one another to tell Jesus, shows the unease and surprise of the situation.

But something very beautiful and significant is going on here. The Greeks are not treated with revulsion or sent away (as often happens in the Bible when one ethnic group encounters another). No, Philip and Andrew are swiftly able to overcome their biased hesitancy and grant the Greeks their request. And it is certainly no accident that Philip and Andrew are the two Apostles to respond this way. Out of the Twelve, Philip and Andrew (or Philippos and Andreas) are the only two with Greek, not Hebrew, names.

Many scholars argue the significance of this should not be underestimated. For Jewish families to give Greek names to their children is an undeniable sign of tolerance and cultural openness towards

Greek (Hellenistic) culture. We are told in verse 21 that Philip was from Bethsaida, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee; we know, of course, that Andrew and his brother Simon were also from Bethsaida. Philip would likely have grown up with them.

That these Galilean peasants from a backwater community should be given names of Gentile origin is not only so astonishingly unlikely (given the painful history of their people), but would also have profoundly influenced their perspective, and arguably was what helped them be so generous to the Greeks. It is unlikely, for instance, that Simon the Zealot – a puritanical, militant nationalist freedom fighter – would have responded to the Greeks in quite the same tempered and affirming manner.

This mixing together of different cultures, begun by the traumatic historic chapter of exile, was clearly having a profound ripple effect. Big things have small beginnings.

There was a lot about Judaism that intrigued the Greeks: faith in only one God, the narrative and antiquity of the Hebrew Scriptures, rigorous ethical codes, and a more structured belief system – were all immensely attractive to Greek culture, and the reason behind many Greek converts to Judaism. The kind of Greeks the two Apostles encountered. But dietary restrictions and circumcision were understandably very controversial.

Conversely, a great many Jews in the Diaspora became ‘Hellenised’ through their love of the Greek way of life: open-mindedness, liberty of thought and expression, religious tolerance, and (most attractively) mixed marriages, the freedom to love whomsoever they wished, Jew or Greek. And yet... pagan idolatry and loose sexual morals were still a substantial point of contention.

Can you see what was happening? A clash of two ancient cultures that were able to benefit so much from one another and from a peaceful coexistence, nonetheless, had so much wretched historically ingrained fear and prejudice to overcome. But who is the one both the Jewish apostles and the intrigued Greeks desire to be near? Who is the peacemaker that breaks down walls? Who is the one within whom there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female?

Like Abraham, Jesus was to begin a new people, a new covenant, a new chosen generation – but one not comprised of a single biological family, or set of tribes, or kingdom, or exiled race – but the whole of humanity. Those powerful words in verse 32: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” It is clear from the Greek that all means all. Not a meagre select favoured few as some branches of Christianity sadly hold as the entire basis of their faith. Everyone. Like Abraham, Jesus was one man with a small band of followers. He and they would change world history. Would create ripples that would become tsunamis.

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John's Gospel works like concentric circles. Jesus first goes to the children of Israel, the Jews, the descendants of Abraham and those of David's kingdom. Then in chapter 4 he visits the Samaritan woman at the well, and many other Samaritans besides, offering love and salvation. Samaritans were descendants of Abraham, but not of the Davidic kingdom, not part of the covenant. Not quite Jews but not quite gentiles either. Then here, chapter 12, we've gone from Jews, to Samaritans, and now to Greeks – gentiles, outsiders, foreigners – and here in the narrative we are told that Christ will draw all to himself.

God's ancient promise to Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him is indeed come to pass. Big things have small beginnings. And this knowledge and conviction would be the drive behind the powerful ministries of the two loving apostles in today's reading.

In the following decades, Philippos and Andreas would travel far and wide over the earth to spread the good news of Christ to the Gentiles. The later life of Andrew is extraordinary and enigmatic, with countless speculations and legends springing up about him. He is regarded by Eastern Orthodoxy as the first bishop (or patriarch) of Constantinople – in the same way his brother Peter is held to be the first bishop (or pope) of Rome. Other tales tell of his missionary journeys to every region surrounding the Black Sea: the countries that are now Georgia, Romania, Ukraine, and Russia, all believe Andrew to be the one who first brought Christianity to them.

The later life of Philip is perhaps more concrete. Early tradition limited his apostolic missionary journeys to Greece, Syria, and Phrygia (in western modern-day Turkey). And sure enough, in 2011 a tomb dating from the first century was excavated under an ancient church in the ruined Phrygian city of Hierapolis – already known for being a major Christian site – and dating and translation of the graffiti on the sepulchre inside left little doubt as to who was originally buried there.

Big things have small beginnings. Who would have thought that a pair of peasants from Bethsaida, a backwater fishing village, perhaps raised in forward thinking, culturally tolerant families, descendants of Abraham, inheritors of a broken oppressed nation with a painful history – would go on to embrace and live out the truth they had always secretly treasured in their hearts – that God loves all peoples and nations, and in Christ draws them all to himself. See how Philip and Andrew changed the world. See how you are called to do the same.

Amen