

Messages across the centuries

I Kings 11:41-12:20

Acts 14:8-20

I Kings 11:41-12:20

41 As for the other events of Solomon's reign-- all he did and the wisdom he displayed-- are they not written in the book of the annals of Solomon?

42 Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel for forty years.

43 Then he rested with his fathers and was buried in the city of David his father. And Rehoboam his son succeeded him as king.

1 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all the Israelites had gone there to make him king.

2 When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt.

3 So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him:

4 "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labour and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you."

5 Rehoboam answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away.

6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked.

7 They replied, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favourable answer, they will always be your servants."

8 But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him.

9 He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?"

10 The young men who had grown up with him replied, "Tell these people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter'-- tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist.

11 My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.'"

12 Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, "Come back to me in three days."

13 The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders,

14 he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions."

15 So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfil the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

16 When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king: "What share do we have in David, what part in

Jesse's son? To your tents, O Israel! Look after your own house, O David!" So the Israelites went home.

17 But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them.

18 King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labour, but all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam, however, managed to get into his chariot and escape to Jerusalem.

19 So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

20 When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David.

Acts 14:8-20

8 In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked.

9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed

10 and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"

12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker.

13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting:

15 "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.

16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way.

17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.

20 But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

Messages Across the Centuries

One of the fascinating things about the bible is the manner in which ideas, ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour which belong to a far distant and foreign age can suddenly leap off the page and cross the

centuries and arrive in front of us with real relevance to our 21 Century world.

It struck me that the two passages that make up tonight's readings illustrate this perfectly.

Take the passage from the First Book of Kings.

Solomon, renowned for his wisdom had died.

The trouble was, for the latter part of his reign, it could be said that his wisdom deserted him and he became somewhat obsessed with building up the splendour of his kingdom.

Not content with building the finest temple the world had ever seen, he also built vast fortifications, spent a fortune on developing chariot technology – the forerunner of British Leyland or MG-Rover perhaps, and developed manufacturing enterprises.

The upside of this was that the nation was far more secure than it had ever been before, the population expanded and new cities and towns sprang up everywhere.

The trouble was it all had to be paid for – Government spending was out of control.

Now where have you heard that before?

So when Solomon died, the people hoped that his son Rehoboam would lighten the taxation load that Solomon's enthusiasm had imposed upon them.

But not a bit of it.

Rehoboam chose to ignore the advice of those who had guided his father and urged him to lead the people in the spirit of 'service'.

Instead he listened to his friends and cronies and developed still further the fortifications, using forced labour principles in their construction.

The upshot was civil war.

And today, history repeats itself.

Never mind the economic crisis the West has endured through irresponsible and uncontrolled public spending, just look at what is happening in the Gaza, in Syria and in Iraq; Israelis and Palestinians are at loggerheads and people are rising up against the traditional despotic leaders and Middle Eastern countries are in turmoil.

But let us leave the time of Rehoboam and come forward nearly a 1000 years to some 20 or 30 years after the Resurrection, to the time of the Acts of the Apostles.

Again we are in a strangely foreign world.

Paul performs a miracle on a cripple and the people of Lystra immediately suppose that Paul and Barnabas are gods, Zeus and Hermes, and they prepare to kill several bulls and burn them as a sacrifice in their honour.

Horrified, Paul and Barnabas rip their clothes and declare that they are human, just like the men and women of Lystra.

And then Paul does what Paul always does – he preaches 'the Gospel'.

But surprisingly, he says nothing about the cross and he does not mention Jesus.

He makes no offer of salvation and there is nothing in what he says about 'justification by faith'!

Is this really Paul preaching?

Well 'Yes' it is, and the message he is giving is that the people who think he is a god should '*turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.*'

And he cites as evidence that it is God who has '*...shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.*'

What horrified both Paul and Barnabas was not the offering of animal sacrifices as such, for this was a normal way of worshipping God among the Jews as well as the Gentiles, but the fact that the worship was going to be offered to them as gods come down to earth in human form.

But what surprises us I suspect, is that suddenly and possibly for the only time on record, we find Paul preaching that God reveals himself to every human race and not just to the Jews and also not just by and through the person of Jesus.

It is, for Paul, a radical diversion from his normal message.

And so we have two very foreign biblical readings.

One provides us with an image of a despotic leader whilst the other takes us into a world where gods walk about as human beings and where worship means killing and burning animals.

So how do these passages leap across the centuries and give us an up-to-date message for us today?

There is a chilling similarity between the account of Rehoboam's inhumanity to his people and what we see President Assad doing in Syria and ISIS in Iraq.

In the Middle Eastern conflicts we see little or no sign of any side voluntarily choosing to *'...lighten the yoke'* on the people who are suffering.

And yet what happened to Rehoboam?

His refusal to *'...lighten the yoke'* led to the kingdom he inherited from his father Solomon to be divided and, to add insult to injury, for his lands to be invaded by the Egyptians.

And although Rehoboam was never brought to trial for his crimes, the lesson is clear; ruling without compassion, without listening to the needs and the wants of those whom you serve does not bring unity, nor security, nor long-lasting dynasties.

History is littered with those who have discovered the truth of that; even our own Queen through the way that the Royal Family initially reacted to the death of Princess Diana.

So the message we may take from the Old Testament lesson is that good will triumph over evil and those who are exploiting and misusing their power will, in time, be deposed; Rehoboam lasted seven years only.

But what of Paul and Barnabas?

We live in a multi-cultural world of ever increasing knowledge.

Sometimes we might want to question the benefits this new found knowledge gives, but part of our greater understanding is an awareness of the other religions through which men and women worship and live out their beliefs.

In Lystra and in this divergence from his normal style of preaching, Paul appears to be saying that there are other religions that are genuine revelations of God and that they should therefore not be despised or regarded as the work of demons.

And so it seems to me that the reading from Acts chimes very well with our new knowledge of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and the other ways in which worship is offered and with the way truth, beauty, justice and goodness are each acted out in daily life.

And if your knowledge of other religions is a bit thin, ask your children and grandchildren for they will have explored these other faiths at school for more than we ever did.

So tonight's lessons are more than just an historical account of something that happened centuries earlier; they have within them truths that we would do well to heed and acknowledge.

Rehoboam did not survive for long – his evil ways led to his downfall just as today's misguided Dictators are discovering that their people will not tolerate their exploitation of them for ever.

And Paul and Barnabas remind us that whilst Christianity might suit us, God is not exclusively ours; he belongs to other faiths just as much as he does to us.

And once again we discover that when we read the bible, we need to have an eye to the meaning that lies beyond the literal words, remembering as we do that God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. Amen.

Mike Rogers

Acts 14:15b

Acts 14:17