

We come to the end of our journey through this part of the book of Acts bringing us to the birth of the Christian church.

Do you want the **good news** or the **bad news**?

We seem to live in an age of **good news and bad news**. If you follow social media at all you often find that someone will post a thought or start a string of comments with which some will agree and some not.

Some will rejoice in the news whilst others may criticise it. Our views are all very different.

It was no different back in New Testament times. Today we are looking at what went on in Antioch.

Here the beginning of the church and the gradual spread of believers is **good news**.

After the stoning to death of Stephen on the grounds of 'blasphemy, many Greek-speaking believers flee Jerusalem and make for Antioch, where they build up a community with many new believers.

When we think of Antioch today (now known as Antakya, in the south-eastern corner of Turkey) we are reminded of the first time that, in this great and diverse cosmopolitan city, believers are called by the name Christians.

This may originally have been intended as a term of abuse for those who believed that Jesus was the Christ – the Messiah.

Antioch is an important port on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean.

In Paul's day it was the third largest city in the Roman empire (after Rome and Alexandria) and had a large colony of expatriate Jews living there among the predominantly 'Greek' population.

Other believers from Cyprus and Cyrene (in modern-day Libya) also arrive in Antioch and preach to the Greek-speaking Gentiles living there.

Barnabas who is also from Cyprus, goes to Tarsus and brings Paul back to Antioch. They stay here teaching the new believers for a year.

During their year based in Antioch, Barnabas and Paul travel to Jerusalem taking a gift from the believers in Antioch for the members of the Jerusalem church who are suffering because of a famine.

That act of kindness is still evident in our lives today, and particularly during this pandemic, in those who donate regularly to our local food banks.

So that's the evidence that the church is growing. That's the **good news**.

The **bad news** is that King Herod Agrippa (grandson of Herod the Great.... the one we think of at Christmas) didn't like what was happening.

He kills James by the sword and he decided to kill Peter too so he arrests him.

The church at Antioch was distressed by the loss of James, and now when Peter was taken, they prayed daily for his release.

Finally, the last day came and went but their prayers were still unanswered. So, the church met together in Mary's home to pray all night.

While Peter was sleeping, an angel from God came into the dark cell and touched him.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Peter prepared himself to leave the prison with the deliverer whom God had sent.

Herod's character is revealed by his behaviour toward the followers of Jesus, including two of the Twelve disciples. He is violent and turns to murder, seeking the favour of the crowd around him.

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!' And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down dead. A miserable end for Herod.

Visitors to modern-day Antakya (Antioch) in Turkey will find little evidence of the thriving Christian community that developed here in Paul's day.

What remains for us today is the worldwide church of Christian believers numbering around 2.4 billion. The family of God to which anyone can belong. That is definitely the **good news**.