

Today's sermon is inspired in a roundabout way by a teacher I had in ninth grade, who the whole school knew as Uncle Roy. He was a nice avuncular man, but an unbelievably boring teacher. He taught RE or religious education, which is actually compulsory in English schools. And in the ninth grade, Uncle Roy introduced us to the Book of Acts. And I was scarred for life.

I still remember week after week seemed to go on in a summer term, Uncle Roy talking to us about Paul's missionary journeys, which make up a big part of Acts, and we had a map of the Mediterranean and we had to mark on it all the places where Paul went. So blue for the first missionary journey, red for the second missionary journey, purple for the third missionary journey. Week after week charting his progress.

I ended the ninth grade never wanting to look at the Book of Acts ever again. And to be honest, I hardly have. But I've decided to right that wrong as part of my Lent penance for Lent this year, I'm putting aside more than 40 years of prejudice, and I've decided to take on the challenge of preaching from the Book of Acts. And more than that, the sermons this Lent will actually be following Paul's missionary journeys.

So let me begin by backing up a bit. If you were here last week, you'll have heard me talking about Paul. Well, he wasn't actually called Paul then. In the story, we were considering of that great change in his life as he's converted on the road to Damascus by Jesus appearing to him in a vision. At that time, he's still called Saul.

But here he's become Paul, and he was helped by a man called Ananias, you might remember last week, who was kind to Paul and laid hands on him and healed him. And that was the beginning of Paul becoming this amazing missionary and evangelist who had such an impact on the early church.

Ananias soon disappeared from Paul's life. But another key character emerged who performed a similarly supportive and encouraging role. That was Barnabas. As you could imagine from Paul's background as a persecutor of the early church, not all the church extended him a warm welcome. But Barnabas did. He saw God's hand on Saul and he took him under his wing and it was under his tutoring that the persecutor Saul became the missionary Paul. And he taught him in the faith.

And in the reading for today, we find them both in Lystra, on the island of Cyprus, on their first missionary journey. And they get caught up in a terrible case of mistaken identity.

I was mistaken for somebody recently. A few weeks ago, I was at the New Academy Museum in LA, which is great. I was sitting on the side, minding my own business on a bench. And somebody came up to me and told me how much they

admired my work. Very quickly, it became apparent that I wasn't who they thought they were. They thought I was an actor whose real name I've sadly now forgotten.

I was all excited, got home and Googled this person who I'd been mistaken for. Very disappointed to find he was not only a very small insignificant actor, but also he was actually quite old now and well into his, well, I won't say how old he was, but he was 25 years older than me, so that wasn't great.

Barnabas in this story gets mistaken for Zeus. Now, how cool is that? That's much better than being mistaken for a bit part actor. There was a story going around Lystra at the time that Zeus and Hermes had once visited the island and nobody recognized them, which led them to exact a terrible revenge. I won't go into that, but I do want to consider Paul's response to being mistaken for Hermes.

"Why are you doing this?" he says. "We're mortal, just like you, and we bring you good news." And look at how he describes that good news. He doesn't say Jesus the Messiah has come because that wouldn't have meant anything to his hearers who were pagan idol worshipers. They knew nothing of God's working with the people of Israel.

When he was talking to a Jewish audience, as he often was, Paul could talk about the law and the prophets, Jesus as Messiah and put Jesus in that context. Here, he was talking to people with whom he had no shared frame of reference, which is why, well, that's more and more like the culture in which we live. So there are lessons here we can learn. Many people today have no particular faith background, which isn't to say they're not spiritual. It's just they lack the vocabulary to express that spirituality.

So look at how Paul tries to connect with his hearers, by inviting them to consider the wonders of creation. "God has not left himself without a witness," he says. "He's made the heavens and the earth and the sea and the sky and all that is in them. He sends the rain in the seasons, filling you with food and your hearts with joy."

Napoleon understood this line of argument. He was once sailing around the Mediterranean and his officers were talking about the existence of God, and they decided amongst themselves that there was no such thing as God. And Napoleon had been silent and not involved in the conversation at all. But at the end of the talk, he lifted his hand, pointed to the sea and to the sky, and he said, "Gentleman, who made all this?"

So Paul actually goes further. He doesn't just point to creation. He points out that the world that God made is good. It, he says, fills our hearts with joy.

We all know that as Christians, we wrestle with the problem of suffering. People will say to us, well, if you believe in a God who is good, how come there's much suffering in the world? And that's a question we can never forget or escape from. But the tables can be turned as well and atheists need to consider the problem of beauty. If as they suggest, the world is just the coming together of various gases and a big bang, how do they explain the sheer beauty of the world? Where does that come from?

St. Paul says something else I want to mention, something particularly appropriate for the season of Lent. Remember, he's talking to people who worship handmade idols. Their temples would've been filled with various gods, and it's those he's pointing at when he says to the crowd, "Turn from these worthless things to the living God."

We all have idols. We all have a tendency to turn from the God of creation to the gods of our own creating. We have an incredible capacity to give worth to the wrong things.

My wife told me recently that she's just seen a survey in which people were invited to say if they had to lose either their cell phone or their hand, which would they choose? And according to my wife, the majority of people said, they'd rather lose their hand. I can't quite believe this, but my wife assures me that it's true.

There are people around, a majority of people around, who'd be prepared to lose a body part rather than having to give up their cell phone. What do we value? Lent is a time to examine our values, a time to reflect. To ask ourselves, are we valuing the right things? Are we giving worth to the right things?

Paul's invitation to turn from these worthless things to the living God is an invitation for us to ponder in this Lenten season.

It needs to be said that the people in Lystra didn't take up Paul's invitation. They ended up stoning him and Barnabas and dragging Paul out by his ankles. As we go through Paul's missionary journeys, we'll see how much of his journeying was filled with such disappointments and apparent failures. And we can learn from St. Paul, how to handle disappointments.

St. Paul was brave and faithful in the face of all the disappointments that he faced. Look how our reading ends. When the disciples surrounded him after he'd been left for dead, Paul got up and went back into the city. The next day, he went with Barnabas to Derbe and he started preaching all over again. He was brave and faithful.

I've one final thought about this passage. I'm struck by the role in the story played by those who came from Antioch and Iconium. We're told they came and won over the crowds, and

because of their influence, the people of Lystra went from trying to worship Paul and Barnabas to very soon trying to stone them and kill them.

The crowd seemed to be won over extremely easily, and it's even easier now to win over a crowd, now that we have so much media available, imparting very particular views.

Just look at what's happening in Eastern Europe. On the Russian side of the border, the crowds have been persuaded by the media to think that there's a military exercise going on next door to de-nazify the country. Whereas on the Ukrainian side of the border, they're being invaded by a foreign power. That's an extreme example, perhaps, but we're all victims of group think. We're all shaped, and dare I say manipulated, by the media that we digest.

So I have one final invitation for you to consider today. Last week, I suggested that we take on something ridiculous for Lent. Well, here's a ridiculous suggestion. Why not this Lent, seek out a media which is the opposite side of the political divide to that which you normally consume?

So if you normally watch Fox, try a bit of CNN in Lent. If you normally take the New York Times, see what the National Review is saying. It might help us to reflect on how we're unduly influenced by the media crowds, and the worst that can happen is at least you'll get a different perspective and know what the other side are thinking.

So these are my thoughts on Paul's first missionary journey. And I have to say that I have actually been pleasantly surprised this week about how much I've enjoyed preaching on this passage from the Book of Acts. What I thought would be a real drag has turned out not to be.

And I hope that might be true for you. Let's use Lent to do something that we perhaps wouldn't normally do, something that doesn't excite us. We might actually find it helpful. Amen.