

The Gospel on Trial (Paul on Trial)

Acts 21:1-14

Acts 26:24-32

Here we are on the home straight in the story of the Early Church: the Acts of the Holy Spirit. At last, after many weeks of travel and suspense, and in spite of dire warnings, Paul arrived at his first destination: Jerusalem. Was he right to brush aside his friends who implored him to abandon his plan? What about the messages of the Holy Spirit through prophets? Are we to blame Paul for his obstinacy or admire him for his unshakeable resolve?

I think we can affirm that Luke believed Paul to be right in going to Jerusalem (the 'we' passages in Acts start here).

The Holy Spirit led to this decision recorded in 19:21 (I must also visit) and further the 'compulsion' he felt in 20:22 to visit both Jerusalem & Rome both 'to pneumatī' in the Spirit. Luke sees Paul as following in the Masters footsteps as all good disciples. 21:4 & 21:11 are therefore classic examples of people genuinely believing that the Spirit was guiding them but being genuinely wrong! Agabus could in fact be more a predictive prophecy rather than a prohibition (i.e. what would happen if he did rather than he should not go..). The warning was divine but the urging was human! Luke surely intends us to admire Paul for his courage and perseverance. Like Jesus he sets his face towards Jerusalem and like Jesus, divine predictions of suffering did not deter him!

So the story rolls on: assaulted, arrested, bound and brought to trial. Following three epic missionary journeys Luke describes now five trials he had to endure (before the Crowd, the Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus, and finally Agrippa).

So let's ask what the Lord would have us note about Paul actions and attitudes, and finish with the conclusion of the final trial:

1. He Set His Face to Jerusalem/Rome (do we?)

19:21 I must (Paul Affirms)

23:11 "you must also testify in Rome" (the Lord appeared to Paul). The Lord confirms!

Romans 1:10 written from C & E

Like Isaiah (50:7) his face was set like flint!

a. We need to be similarly single-minded and repent of our apathy.

b. We need to catch the Vision, the Lord is giving us. (Individual/congregational and the Bride of Canterbury)

c. We need to ask where our Rome is? (For most of us it will be centred in Canterbury, then East Kent, then and the Southeast.

So set your face, your heart, and your soul on God's gracious purposes for your life.

2. He Walked the Way of the Cross (do we?)

Matthew 16:24 'If anyone would come after me...'

a. Take up your Cross daily: suffering/prison/chains.

b. Deny Self: don't be tempted into taking the easy way out.

c. Follow Jesus: obedience whatever the cost.

All of this was built upon His calling expressed in: 26:17/18 (read).

Comfort Zone: I hope not?

3. He Took Every Opportunity to Witness (do we?)

Before Festus & Agrippa (26:24-32): our reading.

a. Boldness (of Holy Spirit)

b. Gift of Wisdom (from Holy Spirit)

c. Reasonableness of the Gospel (anointed by the Holy Spirit)

There was an irresistible integrity about Paul.

He called People back to the Truth embodied in Christ.

Paul was utterly Jesus centred: am I?

Jerusalem & Rome were the centres of two enormously strong power blocs. The faith of Jerusalem went back two millennia to Abraham. The rule of Rome extended some 3 million square miles round the Mediterranean. Jerusalem's strength lay in history and tradition, Rome's in conquest and organization. The combined might of Jerusalem and Rome were overwhelming. If a solitary dissident like Paul were to set himself against them. The outcome would be inevitable. His chances of survival would resemble those of a butterfly before a steamroller. He would be crushed, utterly obliterated from the face of the earth. Yet such an outcome probably never even entered Paul's mind as a possibility. For he saw his situation from an entirely different perspective. As with Jesus so with Paul he was not traitor to either Church or State: although this was how his accusers tried to frame him (25:7-8 the charge was that he was against the temple and against Caesar). So lets drop in on the final trial before Agrippa where we see combined all the authority of the Jews and of Rome. Chrysostom, an Early Church Father said: See what an audience is gathered together for Paul!

So what do we see in Paul? Notice that he makes no attempt to ingratiate himself with the authorities: he wanted the Kings salvation not his favour. So he did not stop with the story of his own conversion; he was concerned for Agrippa's conversion too. Three times Paul repeats the elements of the gospel in the kings hearing. First he summarises Christ's commission to him to bring people into his light, power, forgiveness and new community (v18). Secondly he describes how he is being obedient to the heavenly vision in terms of preaching that people should repent, turn to God and do good works (v20). Thirdly he detailed his continuing mission' to this very day', which was to testify that, as the Scriptures had foretold, Christ

died, rose and proclaimed the dawn of the new age (v23). Each time Paul thus repeated the gospel in court, he was in fact preaching it to the court. Festus might call him mad, as some had said of Jesus, but Paul knew what he said to be reasonable and true (v25). And when he finally addressed Agrippa he was confident that the king not only believed the prophets (v27), but was also sufficiently familiar with the facts about Jesus to be persuaded of the truth.

Thank God for such courage! Kings and Queens, governors and generals did not daunt him. Jesus warned his disciples that they would be brought before kings and governors' on account of His name and had promised that on such occasions he would give them 'words and wisdom' (Luke 21:12). Jesus had also told Annanias (who had presumably passed the information on) that Paul was his 'chosen instrument' to carry His Name 'before the Gentiles and their Kings and before the people of Israel' (9:15). These predictions had come true and Paul had not failed.

And today we only fail because of our lack of confidence in the Gospel: (Ephesians 2:8-10 For it is by grace you have been saved through faith: this not from yourselves, it is a gift of God, not by works, so no-one can boast! We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do). For God's sake and for Canterbury's sake we need that rectified. Paul could say because of his faithful proclamation that he was 'innocent of the blood of all men' (20:26). Could we affirm the same with any confidence?

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