

Sun 1st Dec 2024 Advent Sunday, Faith & Reason Acts 26v1-25

26 Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.”

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defence: ² “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴ “The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. ⁵ They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. ⁷ This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. ⁸ Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

⁹ “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

¹² “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,^[a] ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

¹⁵ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ¹⁶ ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

¹⁹ “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. ²¹ That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²² But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— ²³ that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defence. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

²⁵ “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable.

A few years ago I was sat in the Tesco's car park in Weston-super-Mare listening to the news about the havoc being caused by Storm called Eunice and I was thinking to myself it didn't seem that bad to me. But just a few moments later I got a text message from our tenant reporting that the whole side wall and fence had come down at our family house in Cheltenham, leaving the whole garden exposed. Thankfully no one was walking along the pavement next to it at the time or they might have been seriously injured.

The next few hours and days were rather stressful as I tried to figure out who might come and repair it. All the people I tried were booked up, busy or just unavailable. I prayed and called and called and prayed. Then finally, joy of joys, I got through to Rich Finch, a wonderful builder who had built our extension 20 years ago. I knew he had retired, but as I explained the situation he gently replied 'it's ok Tom, I'll come and sort you out!'

What a relief – what joy! Our expert builder would come to fix the mess.

Today is Advent Sunday and we have lit the candle of hope, because Advent is a declaration: It's ok people – Jesus is coming! The Lord who created the world is coming back to fix the world's mess. Hallelujah!

At the incarnation, Jesus came as a human being to enable us to get right with God and stay in touch with him. But He will be back, to sort out the rest of the world's mess when his wonderful Kingdom finally arrives in full.

He is coming people! So we can be hopeful and joyful today despite all that is going on in the world today.

When the Apostle Paul finally got to speak to King Agrippa after several years of imprisonment, he didn't rant or get angry. He began with hope (v6). *'King Agrippa... it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.'*

If you distil Christianity down to its elements, these three remain: Faith, hope and love. Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed by what is happening around us, but Jesus came to reconnect us with God so we too can inherit the gift of faith, hope and love that God promised to both Paul and all who turn to him.

Paul goes on in the passage to describe his conversion experience for the third time in the book of Acts. It is really interesting that the author Luke includes it again and again, but each time we are given more details of what actually happened on the Road to Damascus.

Rob Gray is speaking tonight and he has researched all the background and context of this passage brilliantly so I will let him fill you in on that. But my understanding of Acts is that it was written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel as a kind of expert witness statement on behalf of Paul at his legal trials in Rome. The fact that Paul's testimony is included three times serves to underline the magnitude of Paul's divine calling. As a Christian called by Jesus, Paul was obliged to put God first, which turned his entire life and purpose upside down, and put him at odds with the ruling authorities at times. The same applies to us. If you have been called by Christ, then serving him must shape and if necessary, overrule our personal preferences, our work, our family life and the way we relate to the society and system we live in.

That is why the dialogue between the Lord Jesus and Paul on the road to Damascus is so fascinating but also deeply challenging.

When Paul asked *'Who are you, Lord?'* The Lord replied

“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ¹⁶ ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

As I was thinking about this passage for the last couple of weeks, a few things really grabbed me.

Firstly it never ceases to amaze me that the Lord called Paul to serve him despite the fact that he was a scheming murderer, still planning further violence and abuse against church members. You heard last Sunday how we must all work tirelessly to keep everyone safe and uphold safeguarding excellence in this church, which I am very grateful for. That being said, by definition the church will never actually be a place of zero risk, because it is an assembly made up of people: Saints and sinners together. We mustn't be naive, foolish or complacent about the risks, but we mustn't close our doors to the optimistic hope that forgiveness and second chances are available for everyone too. If the Lord can take risks with people then we must redouble our efforts to remain open as a place of redemption and hope for everyone. Like it says in the fabulous hymn 'To God be the glory' 'the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.'

The second thing that struck me forcefully was the phrase 'Now get up and stand on your feet.'

I am not a prolific letter writer but in recent weeks I have felt compelled to write to our MP Vera Hobhouse to express my concern over a few issues.

I have often resisted writing because I feel like I never have all the facts at my fingertips and whatever my gut feelings are, I suspect there would always be some bigger counter-argument that would place me in the realm of the ill-informed or naïve. However, more recently I have felt the Lord asking me to get up and take a stand.

At the beginning of November I wrote this 'Having heard the dreadful statement this week that 'more children have been killed in Gaza than soldiers' I feel moved to write to you to ask the following: Is it right that the UK is continuing to profit from arms sales to Israel?'

I received a kind reply saying that this was indeed a matter she is continuing to raise in parliament. I am very grateful for that.

I also wrote before Friday's assisted dying debate outlining my concerns over the creeping inevitability of psychological pressures on the elderly and vulnerable, on doctors, judges and care providers, and also on the effect on society as a whole as we move further and further away from the safeguard and concept of the sanctity of life. But the bill went through by a slim majority of 55 votes. So we continue to pray for our nation.

As well as the erosion of the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage is also under fire from both society and sadly from many Bishops within the church of England.

I was very saddened by the resignation of Justin Welby as the Archbishop of Canterbury over historic safeguarding failures, because in many respects I have really valued his leadership and humility. However, in a recent interview on 'the rest is politics' podcast with Alistair Campbell and Rory Stewart, the Archbishop's answers to one question clearly contradicted and

undermined the Church of England's official teaching on the sanctity and doctrine of marriage. He effectively said that couples should expect God to bless sexual relations in any committed relationship – whatever that means. A further video issued by Bishop Martin Snow declared that stand-alone services for the blessing of unmarried and same-sex couples will be officially authorised soon, as though General Synod's authorisation is a fait accompli. The problem for me is that when the practice of the church doesn't match up to the teaching of the church, then I feel hypocrisy has taken hold. I would be more sympathetic if Synod had voted to amend the doctrine of the church to include blessing for everyone in a covenant marriage relationship. But as it has turned out, I feel I must join with our Bishop Michael by standing up and saying this particular compromise is not right. Like him I want to be welcoming and inclusive to everyone, but the Prayers of love and faith as commended by Martin Snow and supportive Bishops is not helpful for the witness or mission of the church.

So the church of England finds itself in limbo once again, as we await the appointment of a new Archbishop and I will be praying for someone of extraordinary character who can handle such a demanding position. I guess that person would have to be someone like the Apostle Paul, who was loving at his core, but was equally resilient, tough as old boots and probably so focussed that they would carry on preaching all night even if someone had died and had to be resurrected half way through the evening! (We didn't cover it in our sermon series but do read the delightful story of Eutychus in Acts 20:7–12).

The final thing that I have found so powerful about about this passage is the profound clarity of the call to Christian mission: *'I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

We don't like binary categories these days, but the truth is that if the stats are to be believed the majority of people in our nation are walking in darkness and need their eyes opening to the glorious light of God's love and power.

So how do we open people's eyes? By shining the light ever more brightly. Like opening the curtains to a room while someone is still asleep in bed. The light begins to penetrate their eyelids and chemical changes start to occur to bring them in to wakefulness.

Every time you serve in our community, or pray for someone, or speak about the goodness of God, another light goes on like the Christmas lights that brighten the advent season.

This advent we can proclaim the glorious message of forgiveness and light. Jesus is coming to fix everything – even if we have to take our stand against the powers and principalities in the meantime. But our hope is sure and our footing is certain – if we will place our trust in Jesus our rock and our deliverer.