

Paul's defence before Felix (Acts 24)

Patrick: shaped his world and we are still talking about him

This week many of us have been thinking about the story of a man whose life made such a massive impact on his world that he is still talked about today. I'm recording this the day after St Patrick's day – the day when huge numbers of people around the world attempt to identify an ounce or two of Irish blood in the system so they can wear green and eat cabbage and Irish stew!

Patrick had a remarkable faith and relationship with God and he was very influential in the spread of Christianity in Ireland. By his own account he baptised thousands of Irish people who had turned to believe in God.

We're going to talk today about another man who lived a few centuries before Patrick, but who made an even greater impact on his world and whose influence is still deeply felt.

If you have been following the story of Acts, you will know that from chapter 9 on, much of the focus is on the part played by Paul in the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the Church.

In chapter 24 - our focus today - Paul has run into trouble with the Jews in Jerusalem and he has been shipped off to Caesarea on the coast where he encounters Felix, the Roman governor.

The first nine verses of the chapter feature Tertullus: he's a lawyer representing the Jewish religious leaders and he makes several accusations against Paul.

- He calls him a troublemaker (verse 5), literally a 'pest';
- He claims Paul has been stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world;
- He describes him as a ringleader of what he calls the Nazarene sect (the followers of Jesus);
- And he accuses him of attempting desecrate the temple (that's a reference to what happened in chapter 21).

From verse 10 Paul gets to defend himself. In verse 21 Felix decides to kick for touch rather than reach a verdict and he orders Paul to be kept under guard.

From verse 24 it all becomes a bit more personal as Paul talks to Felix about Jesus and the implications of the gospel.

I want to focus on three things about Paul from the chapter:

- (1) A bit about Paul, the man;
- (2) Something about his motivation;
- (3) His message, as we read the summary of how he engaged personally with Felix and his wife, Drusilla.

Paul - the man

We know quite a bit about Paul from various parts of the New Testament. For one thing, we have what Luke tells us about him in Acts. For another, like Patrick whom we mentioned at the start, Paul wrote things down. We have various letters that he wrote to churches and individuals.

Notice what he says about himself here in Acts 24 in his response to the accusations of Tertullus and the Jews.

Interestingly, despite the hostility of the Jewish leaders towards him, he had quite a bit in common with them in terms of his beliefs and his religious background.

- Like them, he worships the God of his ancestors (14). This is the God who had called Abraham and promised to bless him.
- Like them, he believes what is written in the Law and the Prophets: that's short-hand for what we call the Old Testament. Paul accepted what was written there and believed its promises.
- Like them – at least some of them, for the Jewish leaders were divided on this one – he has a hope in God that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

In terms of his upbringing and basic beliefs, Paul was a good Jew. In fact he had been brought up as a Pharisee.

We tend to have a somewhat negative impression of the Pharisees because of the way they opposed Jesus, and because we may struggle with their legalistic attention to detail. But if you wanted to find someone who took the observance of God's law seriously, find a Pharisee. They fasted and they tithed. They were very anxious to get things right.

If you visit Israel today you will still find people who take obedience to the law very seriously. I've been there a couple of times and on both occasions the small group of people I was with was accompanied by a wonderful Jewish guide called Josh. We had some great conversations. We talked about the debate about whether squeezing the juice from a lemon was classified as work: for if it is and you are a serious Jew, you had better not squeeze a lemon on the Sabbath.

On Friday evening Josh had to be home before sunset, for that is when the Sabbath begins. You need to make sure you have your meal prepared – and you need to have an arrangement for Saturday because you will not be able to switch on the electricity to cook – at least manually.

If you stay in a hotel, you will find a Sabbath lift: it's programmed in such a way that you don't need to press the buttons

These are people who are deeply concerned to do things right. That amount of detail may seem like a heavy burden, but it's hard to criticise their zeal.

It's interesting that in his letter to the church in Philippi Paul talked about his religious credentials and he said that in regard to the law, he was a Pharisee.

But there is something more that we need to notice about how Paul describes himself, or more specifically, how he describes his worship, in Acts 24. In verse 14 he admits that he worships the God of his ancestors as a follower of the Way which his opponents call a sect.

It's the same God, the same Old Testament, but something has changed. Paul has met Jesus and Jesus has turned his world upside down. This is the Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. His people are those who have understood who he is and have set out on a journey of following him: a new Way of living and a new Way to life.

For Paul, all of his religiosity, however sincere and heartfelt, has become less than nothing in comparison with Jesus. No longer will Paul seek to build his life and his acceptance with God on his own achievements as a fanatical law-keeper: he is building his life on Jesus.

I wonder where we look for our identity and our status. Is it in our education? Is it because we have come from a good family? Is it in the colour of our passport? Where do we look if we want to be accepted by God? Is it the depth of our commitment to religious observance?

What happens when Jesus interrupts us to that in the final reckoning none of it counts: what counts is knowing him?

Paul - his motivation

We need to go further and say something about Paul's motivation. I'm thinking of verses 15 and 16. Here they are again:

I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

As I said earlier, the Jews were divided on this. Many of the ruling class were part of a group called Sadducees. As Luke tells us in chapter 23, these people were the anti-supernaturalists of the Jewish world. They did not believe in a resurrection, nor did they have any space in their thinking for angels or spirits. On the other hand, 'the Pharisees believe all these things.'

Of course the big point of difference between Paul and the Pharisees was the resurrection of one specific individual, Jesus of Nazareth. Paul was convinced he was alive: after all, he had met him. The fact that he was alive changed everything about who he was. For Paul, it was a powerful declaration that he was the Son of God. It was a sign that God would judge the world through him.

Paul believed that not only would the righteous and wicked be raised, but that he – and we – would have to appear before the risen and exalted Jesus.

This was not an abstract piece of theological information that had no relevance to how Paul lived his life. He knew he was accountable. There would be a day when he would have to give an account of how he had lived. It was because that was a vivid reality for him that he did what he could to maintain a clear conscience before God and man.

Listen to what he wrote about this in 2 Corinthians 5:9-10:

We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done in the body, whether good or bad.

You might like to add Romans 14:12 to that:

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Sometimes we'd like to think that life is free of consequences. We can live whatever way we choose and as long as we don't hurt anyone we are fine. Paul knew that he would be held to account, and because of that he worked to maintain a clear conscience and he made it his goal to please Christ. Whether he lived or died, that was the aim of his life: pleasing Christ. What a wonderful thing for someone to live like that, and when they reach the end of their life, the life that has been entrusted to them by God, they hear Jesus speak these words: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

Let me add a few words from Patrick. He wrote,

Although I am imperfect in many ways, I want my brothers and relations to know what I'm really like, so that they can see what it is that inspires my life.

I am not ignoring the evidence of my Lord, who testifies in the psalm: 'You destroy those who speak lies.' And again he says: 'A mouth which lies kills the soul.' And the same Lord says in the gospel: 'The idle words which people speak, they will account for on the day of judgment.'

So I should greatly dread, with fear and trembling, this sentence on that day, where nobody can avoid or escape, but all shall give complete account of the least of sins before the tribunal of the Lord Christ.

Like Patrick, Paul believed in the resurrection of the dead – and that was his motivation for living well.

But finally, what about Paul's message?

Paul - his message

There is a shift between verse 23 and verse 24. Verse 23 wraps up the judicial confrontation and verse 24 sets the scene for some more personal interaction between Paul and Felix. They evidently had a number of conversations. I don't know what kind of personal interest Felix had in Paul's faith. Luke says that Felix was well-acquainted with the Way and I'm sure that conversations with Paul would have added to that. But it seems that a lot of his motivation for going back to talk with Paul was his hope that Paul would offer him a bribe.

History tells us a bit about Felix. He was not of noble birth, and his political success seems to have had more to do with the influence of his brother. He married three wives – all of them from Royal families. The third was Drusilla, who features in our chapter. She was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I. Apparently as a teenager she had been married to the King of Emesa, but Felix had stolen her away, allegedly with the help of an Egyptian magician; at the time she was only 16.

In terms of how he handled power, Felix could be ruthless. One historian, Tacitus, said of him that "he exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave."

What message would you have for someone like that? How would you witness to a powerful and corrupt person?

Paul was incredibly bold. I doubt he would have thought there was anything incredible about it, but he was not phased by his audience. There was no sugar-coating or playing down the challenge. In general terms, he talked about 'faith in Christ Jesus'. That is where Felix – and Drusilla – needed to get to.

It's where all of us need to get to. That applies whether we are the most powerful person in the land, or if no one outside our family has ever heard of us, or if we're just somewhere in the middle.

Paul's mission was to see people commit themselves in faith to Jesus Christ, the Son of God who was crucified for their sins and then raised again.

The gospel means good news. But it's also a message that brings a challenge and you will see that Paul zeroed in on three themes that Felix and Drusilla needed to consider.

- Righteousness. God is righteous. What happens if we are not?
- Self-control. It was quite something to talk about this with someone like Felix. I doubt that it was one of his qualities.
- Judgment to come. In some ways I suppose you could turn a blind eye to righteousness or to self-control if you knew there was never going to be any accountability. But as we have already seen, Paul believed that both the righteous and the wicked would be raised. There was judgment to come.

I think Felix must have had some flicker of conscience. You can tell from the way he reacted. Verse 25 says he was afraid. Old translations say that he trembled. Another modern translation says that he was alarmed. Something of the reality of facing the judgment of God had pierced his armour and he was afraid.

It would have been a remarkable thing for him to fall on his knees there and then, to cry out for mercy, and put his faith in Jesus. But he didn't. Once again he kicked for touch. Enough for one day. I'll get back to you.

There is no evidence of him ever again coming as close to getting right with God.

That's why when we sense God nudging us to get right with him, to put our faith in Jesus, we need to pay attention. The moment may never again present itself.

Patrick's confession

I began with Patrick and I will finish with some more of his own words. Like Felix, he faced the challenge of the gospel. Unlike Felix, he responded.

I was taken into captivity in Ireland, along with thousands of others. We deserved this, because we had gone away from God, and did not keep his commandments. We would not listen to our priests, who advised us about how we could be saved. The Lord brought his strong anger upon us, and scattered us among many nations even to the ends of the earth. It was among foreigners that it was seen how little I was.

It was there that the Lord opened up my awareness of my lack of faith. Even though it came about late, I recognised my failings. So I turned with all my heart to the Lord my God, and he looked down on my lowliness and had mercy on my youthful ignorance. He guarded me before I knew him, and before I came to wisdom and could distinguish between good and evil. He protected me and consoled me as a father does for his son.

That is why I cannot be silent – nor would it be good to do so – about such great blessings and such a gift that the Lord so kindly bestowed in the land of my captivity. This is how we can repay such blessings, when our lives change and we come to know God, to praise and bear witness to his great wonders before every nation under heaven.