

Take a Stand, Take Courage.

Acts 22.30 – 23.18 / 23.19-35 18th April 2010.

Home Group Notes.

Worship: Psalm 1

Welcome Word.

1. Read Acts 22.30 – 23.5
2. What do you think of Paul's conduct? What would you have done?
3. Read Acts 22.6-23.10
4. Have you ever had to take a stand?
5. When did you last tell someone you go to church?
6. Its silly but who would you rather be Darcy or Bingley / Jane or Lizzy? Pharisee or Sadducee? Come up with your own.
7. Read Acts 23.11-22
8. If Jesus appeared to you and said Take courage, what do you think he'd say next?
9. What conclusions can Paul draw from vs11?
10. How can we encourage the faith of the young?
11. Read Acts 23.23 – 35
12. What do different translations have for vs 23 "spearmen".
13. Does anyone have a bible with notes that will tell us if Felix was a good man or bad man?
14. What do we make of the slowness of Luke telling us this event, or of the detail and the geography?
15. I didn't make a sermon point out of these last verses, if I had what would it have been? Do let me know!

Works: Pray. For the persecuted Church? For Jews and Jerusalem. For yourselves and the stand that you take week in week out. For our religious rulers.

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Last week I left you with the challenge What are you waiting for? Paul is in prison and now the Commander releases him and wants to know what all this nonsense is about so he summons the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin were the ruling council for the Jews. Mostly made up of Sadducees but there were some Pharisees amongst them. Their chair is the High Priest and the high priest got to be so on account of his collaboration with the Romans and the promising them of lots of money. It was a position that you bought. So we shouldn't be surprised at the historian Josephus describing the High Priest Ananias as a bad man – someone who even took away the tithes from the priests by violence (Antiq xx.9.2).

Paul now stands before Ananias and starts to make his defence. No sooner has he opened his mouth when someone has a go at slapping him. Paul calls him a hypocrite and then has to apologise.

Paul isn't actually hit, he's only threatened but his response is quite strong and rude and what he's really saying is "I never knew a man like that could become High Priest!"

Some of you will quite like that – Paul stands up for himself. Others of you might think that he's not quite as calm as Jesus.

So let's focus on what we can learn from this and not get too worried about the other bits. We learn that it's good to keep your conscience clear before God. We learn that its good to know something about your faith and what for you is the bottom line. And we learn that God can do great things through little people. Which means you can expect a quote from LoTR later in the sermon.

Paul says I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience. And that must be a good thing to say. Bear in mind that this doesn't make Paul right. There was a time when, he thought he was doing God's will when he oversaw the murder of Stephen. But as we saw last week, a conversion experience for him, opened up his conscience to God and he repented.

So perhaps the trick for us to learn here is about inviting God to show us how He would have us grow. Where are my blind spots and my hypocrisies, where are the sins that I commit but don't see, or perhaps I no longer mind committing them. And pray not only for God to reveal them but also for the grace to say Sorry to God, to repent.

At other times I have preached: Keep short accounts with God.

Paul finds himself on the back foot. He's had to apologise. Maybe Paul's eyesight isn't very good. Maybe he didn't know who the High Priest was, Maybe Paul is being deliberately sarcastic when he says "I didn't realise that a man who so easily spouts violence could be the High Priest".

Paul isn't doing a very good job at defending himself. He ought to be saying Look I know you don't like what I preach but you must understand that I didn't take a non-Jew into the courtyard of the Jews, honestly I'm a good Jew I am. But he doesn't. He starts off by insulting this godless high priest – which might not have won him many friends at the time but it might also have pricked their conscience. They all know that High Priest Ananias is a bad man. He's going to retire in a few years time. The year is somewhere between AD52 (when Felix was made Gov) and 59AD when Ananias retired. In the year 66ad there will be a rebellion against the Romans and even though Ananias is nicely retired, his own people will seek him out and kill him. Initially he escaped, but they caught him up and killed him.

It takes a bold man like Paul to stand up and say something a little bit rude and prick the conscience of others who are there enjoying the privileges that come from the wings of this bad man.

Maybe that is the 2nd lesson – Keep short accounts with God. And Take a Stand. If you can, wear a cross at work, say to someone Yes I went to Church yesterday and it was uplifting. When someone has a go at you saying You're a Christian what do you think I should do? Then be ready either with a prayerful answer (a gentle answer turns away much wrath) or a sharp retort that says I'm not afraid of you. – I see there was a letter in the Sussex Express about just this!

Paul takes a stand and his stand is not on the nitty gritty detail about whether or not Trophimus is circumcised or whether circumcision is that big a deal – both of which would upset the whole assembly.

Instead he says This all really boils down to whether you're open to the idea of life after death. Whether there is any meaning in the lives that we live or in the deaths that we may yet face. Whether we have any hope that can carry us through pointless grey days and guilt and sin and being sinned against by others.

It seems astonishing to us that the people in charge of how the temple is run are the people who believe the least.

The Sadducees took the written law very seriously – so eye for an eye, really did mean the loss of an eye ball for the guilty. The Pharisees, you'll be glad to hear, looked at that verse differently and thought that compensation would be a better way of interpreting it. So the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection, they don't believe in angels, or in spirits of any sort – good or bad. They seem to me to have sucked all the fun and hope out of faith. But they do believe in a literal eye for eye! Josephus says they deny the existence of hell but then they deny the continued existence of your soul beyond this life, and so they deny judgement and what's the point of being good anyway.

There's a game that my children sometimes play in the car and its called Who would you rather be (or something like that). So who would you rather be – Harry Potter or Obi Wan Kenobi! Arwen from Lord of the Rings or Lucy from Narnia. You could even stretch this to Darcy or Bingley. Pharisee or Sadducee? It's going to be Pharisee every time.

Point 1 – keep short accounts with God, point 2 = take a stand! Know what you believe.

Now Paul takes a stand and it all goes wrong. But at least he took a stand. It seems hard to imagine how these scenes can be this violent.

Up on temple mount some Jews saw Paul and they started a riot and the noise is so great that the arresting officer can't figure out what the charge is so they walk him away but it gets so rough they have to carry him away. Then Paul stands up to speak to the crowd and you could hear a pin drop until he says something about God loving gentiles too, even before they become Jews and that makes them mad and there's cloaks and dust being thrown around. Now in court, with civilised men, no need for mob rule here, but the High Priest has ordered Paul to be slapped and now the Pharisees and Sadducees are seriously disagreeing with each other to the point where the Commander feels the need to step in and whisk Paul away. It's really hard for us to see how that sort of thing could be. We see scenes like it on the news sometimes and I just presume that they are whipped up for the purposes of the TV.

But it just gets worse. Over 40 others take a vow not to eat until they have killed Paul. You'll remember that Paul once worked for the Sanhedrin himself when he was keen to arrest Christians. Well, the Sanhedrin is as nepotistic as any other parliament and they're always keen to employ family members so it's nice to find out that Paul has a nephew and he overhears this plot to kill Paul. Those of you who are worried about these 40 people need not worry too much. The Rabbis allowed for removal of vows when they were uttered under Incitement, or Exaggeration or Error or Can no longer be fulfilled because of something beyond your control. So I daresay that they were all happily eating within a couple of days!

The nephew goes to Paul in prison, which says something about the openness of the prison that Paul was in. Very often it was down to the local family to feed you if you were in prison. So the nephew goes in and we have this lovely slow detail, Nephew tells Paul, Centurion takes Nephew to Commander, Commander took the young man by the hand and drew him to one side. Too much detail. It's almost as if Luke has met up with this lad himself. We don't know anything else about this sister of Paul's. We don't know if she ever came to share his views about Jesus, or what her husband did, Did he work for the Sanhedrin too, was he a Pharisee too? Maybe. We don't know.

The Commander does what he was going to do anyway but he does it sooner by sending Paul away by a night march. 200 foot soldiers and 70 cavalry for the first half and then the following day it's just the cavalry that take Paul onto Caesarea. There's a reference here to 200 spearmen. It's a tough greek word and we're not quite sure what it means! Others want to translate it as Pack animals – as if they're carrying some cargo or supplies. Paul arrives in Caesarea and is put up in what was Herod the Great's Palace but is now the local Roman HQ. Paul arrives safe and well but he knows that this is not the end of the story.

He has had a visit from Jesus and Jesus said to him – this is a good start but I'm thinking we should take this all the way to Rome. You might have other hopes, if Jesus were to visit you, you might hope that he'd say Lets end all this pain now come with me to heaven. Or you've been a good chap so far so I think it's okay for you to retire in peace, some where nice and quiet.

But Jesus doesn't say that. The Lord visits him and says Take Courage! On the plus side, Paul now knows that he won't die before he gets to Rome. Paul might be ready for the quiet life but the message from God is Take courage, we're not finished yet.

So lesson 1: Keep short accounts with God.

2. Take a stand.
3. Even the smallest person can change the course of the future (that's the LoTR quote)
4. Take courage God's not finished yet. Amen.