

Pentecost 2010 : Courage, Conversion, Community.

### Home Group

NB – I'll do some HG notes for next week after that you're on your own! Have a look at the *Latest Sermon* where I've put the bible readings that might be used.

Worship: try Psalm 112

### Welcome & Word:

1. What's the most pompous event you've ever been to?
2. Read Acts 25.23-26.32
3. How would you tell your story?
4. What difference has receiving the Holy Spirit been to you?
5. Why does Paul make a big point of this not being new new? (vs 6,7, 22, 23, 25, 26).
6. What pennies would drop for us about Jesus / the Church? (vs15)
7. I said there were two points (nails) and four ways of saying it (hammers). Spot them. Can you find more nails / hammers?
8. What do you make of Festus / Agrippa's attempt to not actually respond? (vs24, 28).

### Works:

Pray, invite the Holy Spirit to refresh you and pour upon you His gifts and within you His fruit, Repent and show your repentance by your deeds!

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Some of you I know find it very **difficult to stand up** here and read a bible reading or give out a notice. I have a lot of sympathy with your **nerves**. I wouldn't say **boo to a goose** until I was about 17 or 18 and later on I was petrified when I first started preaching. You get all nervous and sweaty for the period before hand, you wake up early, don't feel like much breakfast and you **can't wait to get it over** and done with.

Some credit must go to those who have tried to train me and some credit to the experience of time but a lot **of credit should be given to the Holy Spirit**, to God for helping me to stand up and say what I'm trying to say.

In my early **teenage** years I was disproportionately **violent** and swore in a manner that would make a trouper blush. At some point I began to think, this **isn't who I want** to be. But I couldn't change – a mixture of habit and gut reactions and peer pressure and living in that kind of school culture – I can come up with any number of excuses but I knew that this wasn't who I wanted to be. I **prayed and slowly** God's Holy Spirit helped me.

We heard in the bible reading how the Holy Spirit helped to **bring out the best in Paul** and shape him into the man that God had made him to be. We heard how the Holy Spirit brings **Courage**.

Picture the scene: all the **pomp** of the next door king Agrippa and his sister Bernice and fanfare and important men of the city. How intimidating does this get! It's not a legal court, it's not meeting to decide anything, it is meeting to help Porcius Festus with his paperwork. His **paperwork**.

**Porcius** starts off this pompous meeting saying I inherited this **problem Paul** and all the Jews want him dead (not strictly true) but the silly beggar refused to stand trial in Jerusalem and has made an appeal to go to Rome and take his case to Caesar. That's his right, fair enough but I've got to send some **paperwork** with him and I don't know what to write.

So this little **tentmaker** with his hands **shackled** together stands up and tells his story. That's really all any of us can do. It's a shame that **we forget our story**, we can barely remember how God has helped us this week let alone remember what we used to be like before we became Christians, so we really struggle to see our own *before and after* picture.

This isn't far from being one of those **Count Your Blessing** sermons. It's good for us and it's good for those who listen to us if we can think about how we might speak about how God has helped us.

**Dionne** stood up here last week and told her story. Perhaps you might think through what you would say if it was you standing up here.

I always thought that Paul was only responsible for the one death of **Stephen** but here it would seem that there's **more than one corpse** that would cry out for justice against Paul.

It's odd really but Christians are okay with this kind of talk – I was **once a bad man**. But the media and the world are not so okay with it. Perhaps they feel uncomfortable with someone being upfront about their **past failings**.

So Paul says I was once a bad man **but God**. He doesn't say **But then** I turned over a new leaf. He says **But God**.

God speaks to him in **Aramaic** which may disturb some of you to find out that God is not an Englishman. And it's not all easy – God says Look I'm trying to help you here, trying to steer you onto the straight and narrow but you're like a **young untrained ox** whenever I steer you all you do is kick me back.

Paul says Who are you? And the voice says Jesus. So now very quickly all sorts of **pennies start dropping**. Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Whilst those pennies are dropping for Paul I'd like you to notice 2 things. The first is to do with the **Church**. Paul thought he was just being **nasty to some individual** nitwits. But that's not how Jesus saw it. You are persecuting me.

Jesus is among us, this morning, He is with you. We know this because the **bible says so** and it says it again here. Jesus is with us. The presence of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. St John will later write in his book of **Revelation** how Jesus is **walking** among us.

The effect of God's presence in His Church is that it **totally transformed a bunch of cowardly self-absorbed** people into the most amazing movers and shakers the world has seen.

The Holy Spirit – **not quite 30** years earlier – blew through the place where the first disciples were worshipping and **He brought with Him** all sorts of **gifts** and all sorts of **fruit**.

The fruit of the Spirit – love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness and self-control – the fruit of the Spirit has been **quietly at work** in those Christians as He is quietly at work in us, changing us into the **people that God has made us to be**, bringing the best out of us.

Meanwhile **God has been pouring out His gifts** on His people and we see how Paul has been given the Holy Spirit so that he can pray for **healing** and for miracles and for **divine inspiration** and for faith and so on. And it is this same Holy Spirit that is poured out on us.

(**Prayer Chapel** – prayer available after every communion service – idea is to go here straight after taking communion or come and pray after the service with someone.)

Later when we come to **Communion**, I will first bless you, lay my hand on you and **anoint** you with oil and say Pour your Holy Spirit on your servant. Amen. And then Robin will follow up with the bread and the wine.

And as that happens, pray and **invite the Holy Spirit** to fill you afresh with the fruit and with His gifts, pray perhaps that you will be aware of His presence with you.

Now I want to go **back to Paul** and see if the penny has dropped. You see it's **not enough** for Paul to now know the truth. There really is a God and its **Jesus** and the Spirit of Jesus is in each Christian, the Church.

It's not enough to know the truth Paul now has to say **Gulp**, what do I do? How can I ever **face my friends** again? How can I come to terms with this after I have spent years **building** what I thought were **good reasons** for not believing in Jesus and now I'm going to have to eat a lot of **humble pie** and look silly?

Paul now moves his story into sermon mode. It's clever because it doesn't read like a sermon it reads like a story but it is a sermon. It's a sermon with two points, **two nails** if you like but I count at least **four different hammers**.

You're listening to Paul and you're saying to yourself – well there is simply no denying that at the **beginning Paul** is a bad man and now after engaging with Jesus Paul has **changed completely**. So it might be that you're wondering What's the secret, **how do I get some of that?**

So Paul says 2 things but he says them at least 4 times over.

The **first nail** is the call to **Open** eyes, to **receive** the forgiveness of sins, to **repent** and turn, to understand why the Christ would **suffer**. It is the call to **Convert**.

Reason and **philosophy** and history and **archaeology** are very helpful in this regard but what you're going to really need is the **Holy Spirit**, the whisper of God saying You don't have to be like this, **Life doesn't have** to be like this.

This is the call to having our eyes opened and to **repenting** and **receiving** the forgiveness that Jesus gives to us because of His death on the **cross**. The call to conversion.

The **2nd nail** in Paul's sermon is the call to do something about that, to **respond**, to live the life. So Paul says once your eyes are opened the 2nd step is to **turn from darkness** to light, from the power of Satan to God.

The **2nd** step after receiving forgiveness of sins is to take up your place in the Church **community**, among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> step is to show that this means anything to you by the **life you live** and the deeds you do. The 2<sup>nd</sup> step is to see how Jesus is just the **first to rise** from the dead, our resurrection will follow and in the meanwhile we are to **tell people that Jesus is our light** and your light, a light to all people everywhere.

If you like your sermons to have 3 points that alliterate I'm thinking of **Courage** – the Holy Spirit gives gifts and today we see the gift of Courage to Paul as he stands up and speaks. Courage.

**Conversion** – I’ve said before how it’s not my job to convert you. It is my job to tell you what Jesus has done for you and to do my best to help you understand that. It is the **Holy Spirit’s job to open your eyes**, to invite you to repent.

For my 3<sup>rd</sup> C, I like the word **Community**. It’s not enough to know the truth you now have to do something about it.

**Festus’** response is You’re out of your **mind!** And in an unusual move he accuses Paul of being too darn clever. Usually, religious people are told that they are out of their mind and really **stupid** but I wonder if Festus has followed Paul’s argument and now sees the **impossibility** of what Paul is asking Festus to do – to convert.

I can’t do that! What would the **Emperor** say? What would the Jewish leaders here say? You’re out of your mind to be asking me to convert!

King **Agrippa** manages to make fun of Paul and bring in a light hearted moment – Do you really think you can convert me in such a **short time?**

And so there’s a ripple of laughter around the room and it manages to hide the **disquiet** that Agrippa feels.

Because Agrippa knows that **Paul isn’t making** this stuff up. He knows enough about the old **promises of God** and perhaps he has heard something of this Jesus from **Nazareth**.

But perhaps Agrippa is proud, **afraid of losing face**, losing his political grip. Perhaps given a little more time and **humility**, Festus and Agrippa could have worked out **how to be a good Christian governor** and a good Christian king. But the thought is just too much for them to grasp.

And so Paul hits them with this **punchline** and I leave it with you. You might want to **risk turning** it into a prayer when you come to the communion rail. You know enough of Paul’s life to take the risk of praying this prayer.

We’ve seen how the **Holy Spirit** has brought spiritual **gifts** to help His **Church** and the **fruit** of the Spirit to work **inside** each Christian. Today we have seen **Courage** at work.

And we’ve seen how the **Holy Spirit** is also involved in **opening eyes** and bringing us to repentance and forgiveness. **Courage, Conversion.**

And we’ve seen how the Holy **Spirit is needed** for the 2nd step, to **do something** about it, to **take up your place** in the Church community, to live a life that shows you have been touched by God’s Holy Spirit.

Courage, Conversion, Community.

So Paul says – I don’t know if I can convert you in a long or a short period of time, but this is my prayer to God, that not only you but all who are **listening** to me today may **become what I am**, except for these chains. May become what I am, except for these chains. **Amen.**