

A Royal Audience!

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Date: 23 July 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Now you may notice from the bulletin sheet that the title of the sermon this morning is a royal audience and while I would love to say that that is in respect of the audience that I have here today, which of course is highly royal, I was referring to the audience that Paul had to proclaim the Gospel to in this account that were given where he is before King Agrippa and just for those who maybe aren't normally in church with us here or who are not aware of where we are here, we are coming to the end of the story of Acts, the early church and how that church blossomed and grew and Paul who had previously been vitriolic in his hatred of Christianity meets with Jesus Christ and becomes the great apostle and so much so that he is opposed for his proclamation of the Gospel and his own people want him killed so they bring him to the authorities, the authorities see nothing wrong with him, he appeals to Caesar and on his way to Caesar because Paul is a Roman citizen although he was also a Jewish, he meets with King Agrippa here so that is where we are in the story and Dr. Luke is keen to give us details about the spread of Christianity following its very inauspicious beginnings, it didn't start well with a crucified leader and the 11 team members hiding in a locked room for fear of being next for crucifixion but that brings us to where we are now with Paul, one of the leading contenders for the faith and one who had shared the Gospel in Jerusalem Judea, Sumeria and Judea and throughout the known world he is here before King Agrippa, Agrippa being a notorious historical figure as a ruler of the region of Judea but under Roman authority and this account is interesting for us, we believe the Bible is the living word of God, it contains, it is the word and it speaks to us and it gives us the account that God wants us to have and it speaks to us through the Spirit and we recognize it even though historically it is a long way from our own experience that it is really very up to date in all that it says, the majority of people in Edinburgh don't believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, I was telling the folks here yesterday that there is probably not many and our own folks know this ad nauseam, there is probably not many more than 4% of the population of Edinburgh go to any church whatsoever and so if we were asked the question of most people what you think of Christianity, there would be a wide range of answers that you would get from people, there would be a kind of benevolent disinterest from some folk, say that's okay, that's fine as long as you keep it to yourself, I don't want anything to do with it but if that's what makes you tick that's fine, others might be inquisitive, they might be quite interested in why you would believe in such things today, some think it's quirky, old fashioned, many would regard it as being simply cultural, wow you were brought up in a Christian home, that's why you're a Christian but also there are a lot of people who think that Christians are completely crazy, that they are absolute builders for believing in the Gospel today and there's a malevolence, not a benevolence but rather a malevolence against Christianity, these are the people who believe in creation and have an outdated morality or bigoted who are

homophobic, who are brainwashed and who are illiberal in their views and some may summarise their thoughts of Christianity and what it is to be a Christian, similarly to the way Festus did it, who was the Governor Judea who passed on Paul's situation to King Agrippa, in the previous chapter, chapter 25 verse 19 we didn't read it but as he's explaining to King Agrippa why Paul is on trial and why he's being brought, he says these people have an argument about their own religion, rather that they have certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who was dead but whom Paul asserted to be alive, so that would be the, I guess, the position of many people about Christians who say, yeah, they believe in this guy called Jesus who died 2,000 years ago but who they assert rose from the dead on the third day.

Interestingly, that's actually quite close to the matter for us, that we do believe in someone who died and we do believe the scriptures when they tell us that he rose again on the third day. We've examined as Christians the historical claims of Jesus, especially about his death and resurrection and we believe him to be alive and we've experienced him by faith as we have come to put our trust in him, so that in our perspective of living we have a recognition that death isn't the end, that God is God and that Christ alone can bring the light of everlasting life into our spiritual darkness. So Jesus is the center of our faith, he is the center of what we believe and we have put our faith in him as a person and in his claims and in his redemptive work on our behalf and because we have done that and because our lives have been transformed by that, we believe he matters and we believe he matters therefore to everyone because we are all in the same boat before God.

So I want to spend a little while just looking at this account and about what Paul says and his reactions and those who reacted to him, you might find that you will dovetail with some of the reactions, you might have experienced some of these reactions in your own walk of faith and I hope you will find it helpful and challenging as we do so because Paul's testimony and Paul's audit, we spoke about this a little bit last week, but Paul's audience and Paul's testimony is very interesting and this is if God here in his living word is wanting to set up a really interesting juxtaposition because we have a juxtaposition of power and influence. So you have again in a part of the section that we didn't read in verse 23 of chapter 25 which is actually really the beginning of this account, we have the entrance of King Agrippa, so we have got the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then at the command of Festus Paul was brought in, in chains. So you have got this great juxtaposition that has been set up by the author here where you have got Marcus

Julius Agrippa II with all his power and pomp and authority, all the people around him and the people of the court and then you have little Paul in chains, enslaved and it seems to be a position where all the power is stacked in one place, isn't it? And Paul is absolutely powerless and that really is the juxtaposition that we are intended to understand from a human point of view. But as it unfolds we see things differently from God's point of view. It is a kind of David and Goliath story for us and it is a bit like sometimes how we feel today as Christians in the absolute minority, completely powerless and shouldn't really be in the same room as sophisticated intellectual people who reject the gospel.

[8 : 36] There is no contest. But Paul is given the opportunity to address King Agrippa and speak about his testimony and why he is there. And he shares certain facts with him and I am just going to go through these very briefly from verses 4 to 11 of the passage we read.

He shares facts about his background against his accusers. He says, look these guys who accuse me, they have known me for a long time. They have known exactly who I am. I was one of them. I came from the same religious background. I believe the same Old Testament scriptures.

I rubbed shoulders with each of them. I studied with them. I went through education with them and they know who I am. They know my personality. They know my history. I am not new to them.

And they were aware of my previous opposition and hostility, raging hostility against Christianity, so that they appointed me to go out and search out Christians to imprison them. So he says, they knew all about my background. He shares these facts about his background. Then he goes on to share facts about his changed life. In other words, he tells them why his life was changed, why he became from being an oppressor to being a sympathiser and a believer and a follower and an apologist for Jesus Christ. He shares, for the third time in the book of Acts we have the account of Paul's, what we have come to know is his Damascus Road experience. His coming to meet with Jesus Christ and he explains it for himself for the second time and we have the events recorded to make it a third time that we have this testimony shared that he meets with the risen Savior on the road to Damascus. Who is it that you are persecuting? It is Jesus Christ, the risen Savior. And he meets with the living divine Lord and he is transformed and he is given his mission by the living God. And the basis of his changed life is meeting with Jesus Christ, is the resurrection. The resurrection is central to, and we sung about that at the beginning, it remains the central plank of the Christian faith is that we believe not in a dead Savior, not in simply a historical figure from the past but in the risen God. And in verse 8 he challenges them to say, why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? If God is God, if

God is who he says he is, then this is something that he, in his power, he can do and has done in this very unique way in the person of Jesus Christ. And it is interesting that we focus a great deal as Christians on Paul as the great apologist and the great theologian of the early church, which of course he was. But that apology and that theology is based in the fact of the resurrection, it grounds everything and in his testimony of meeting the risen Savior. So his testimony is hugely significant that as he comes to know the risen Savior it transforms his life. And so in your life and in my life as Christians, not only the knowledge of the truth and doctrine and theologians hugely significant but the resurrection and the personal testimony of faith that we have in the risen Savior is hugely significant today as we live out our lives and share our faith. People are very suspicious of facts or of truth as it is revealed or laid out. But they are very interested in our personal testimony and will consider that as we think of the foundation of our faith based in that truth that has transformed our lives. The fact of a changed life. Then thirdly he speaks about the facts of a powerful message. He doesn't simply lay out this truth and say well Luke this is what I have experienced, take it or leave it. He is adamant that there is a message for all of them from the great, the high and the mighty and the powerful to whoever is transformed and changed by the message, turn to God in verses 19 and 20 he says and repent.

[13 : 31] Turn from having your back face to God to facing him and listening to him and considering him and recognising him and responding to his message and to his person and know all the benefits that come from entrusting your life to the Lord Jesus Christ that he knew the forgiveness and the love and transformed heart and belonging and being made clean.

Coming from darkness to light spiritually he saw that and that is a great and powerful theme throughout the gospels that seeing God's love for the first time and recognising the significance of what Jesus had come to do for him personally and indeed for the world.

And that message that he gave in the Kings court was the same message he gave on the streets of the different places that the gospel went out to that was transforming people's lives which is of course why this powerful movement of the spirit of God was opposed by the Jewish leaders because the power was changing. It was no longer in their hands, it was no longer in the Romans hands but people's lives and people's freedom was being bought by Jesus Christ and their lives were being transformed and Christians were turning the world of its day upside down but they didn't like that and so they tried to kill him.

So the facts of the powerful message and then also facts about God's revealed purpose in verses 22 to verses 24 he speaks about how this was always God's intention, this was always God's revealed purpose from the Old Testament scriptures.

It's the irony isn't it that the Jewish leader, religious leaders who wanted him dead were the ones who shared the same Bible as he shared in the Old Testament and what Paul is saying here is saying, look this is the Christ that if you will look has been predicted and prophesied and taught and expected right through the Old Testament scriptures, the hope of the Messiah.

[15 : 47] This is always, there is no plan B, this was always God's plan for redemption and for hope and for life and for forgiveness. It's what all of the Old Testament look forward to, it's what all of the New Testament looks back to the person and work of Jesus Christ on behalf of you and I, broken, spiritually dark and separated, lost and opposing God with no hope beyond this life, only judgment and he brings that message of redemption and hope through Jesus Christ.

So there are many responses to the gospel, we will all have many responses to the gospel here and wherever we try and present that gospel and live our lives as Christians and there are two responses here and they are rather predictable at one level.

Paul seemed to be a nobody yet under the power of God and even in chains here we know that through the ministry of the gospel that he was proclaiming the world was being turned upside down, people were responding to the good news and following Jesus Christ. The power brokers were scared that they no longer had the fear of the people, the people were willing to be martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ.

But despite these facts and despite the fact that people's lives were being changed, there are two responses here that are sad. So it's got a sad sermon, it's a sad sermon today, it's a happy day and will be a happy baptism but it's quite a sad sermon because sad things sometimes happen when the gospel is shared and there are two responses here from those who are in positions of power and authority. The first is from Festus who in verse 24 where Festus says, Paul you're out of your mind, your great learning has driven you out of your mind. Paul you are a nutter, that's the response that Paul is given to his presentation of the gospel. Not on the basis of just being stupid but rather your insanity is due to too much study. Your study of the books has just turned you cross-eyed, you have no idea what you're saying, you're a complete nutcase and it is ridiculous what you're asserting.

Festus was hugely uncomfortable by the presentation that Paul gives. He doesn't feel it's appropriate to be discussed in such an enlightened and significant company as we read from verse, from chapter 25. He thinks it's a personal religious controversy and an outrageous claim about a dead man being alive. He's crazy, he's mad a dead man being alive that you wouldn't trust your life to. And that is often the response that we find that people will give when they hear the Christian message. Rather than engage because the truths that are presented are maybe outside of a person's worldview or their presuppositions or even their comfort zone, rather than engage with that and wrestle with it and see whether there is any truth there, there's a tendency for us just to suppress it and just to wave it away as being the thoughts of craziness. And we judge that through ridicule, it's a very common way of rejecting anything today, it's through ridicule. People distance themselves from the claims of Christianity by ridiculing. We find that very often in the media and sometimes maybe even the liberal elite, Christians are ridiculed as being absolute belters who have nothing serious to add to the debate. It's not a new phenomenon and it is sad that that is the case. And the Bible exposes that and it's not afraid to expose that that will be a response that often is given. But also secondly we have the response in verse 28 of the King himself who says, in a short time as this would you persuade me to be a Christian?

[20 : 15] Now there's quite a lot of debate about exactly what he was saying here, whether he was quite sympathetic or whether he was being very cynical. I think the tendency would be to think that he is really being quite cynical here. He knows Paul is convincing. The facts that Paul presents are clear and he later on recognises that Paul's innocent of the charges that are made against him. Agrippa may even have felt conscious stricken. He was no shrinking violet Agrippa.

To get to the position that he had got to under the influence and power of Rome meant that he had done very many dastardly things and therefore there may have been a sense in which he was conscious stricken. But he would not change. Really Paul? You think that a simple presentation that you're going to change my life? Am I going to relinquish my heart and the power over my own life that I have? The cost would be far too great. And it's an interesting response, isn't it? And it may be that that's how many people think today and it might be today, how you think. Where there's a sense in which it's compelling, your conscience struck by it. It may even be true but I'm not going to change. I don't feel that I'm able to entrust my heart to this Christ that I can't see, that it isn't scientifically proven. We're not willing to relinquish control of our lives at that level.

But it is interesting, isn't it, that at different levels we are willing in our lives to relinquish control. We'll do it at work under a boss. We'll do it medically when we come under the knife in a very dramatic way sometimes when we relinquish control of our lives to a surgeon. We'll do it in our marriage if we have any sense. Now and again, we will relinquish control. We will compromise. We will share. We will recognize that we are not always going to get our own way. But in a much more significant way spiritually, are we willing just because we can't see God physically that we take the chance of keeping, maintaining control, ignoring the facts of the gospel and the claims of Jesus Christ and the evidence of creation and our own image and all that we are and all that we do and all that He claims without considering who Jesus Christ is. So lastly and very briefly here, can I just finish with Paul's comeback to these two responses? And I think they're instructive for us as Christians as to how we should respond when people oppose our testimony, our Christian living as such and a reminder of our responsibility as to how we should be living. Interestingly, Paul's comeback are not necessarily how we would respond to rejection. Sometimes we take the huff. Sometimes you say, well, I tried. Sometimes we just reject people. But that isn't Paul's response. And that is really instructive and helpful for us. He reflects Christ in verses 25 and 26. In response to the claim that he was crazy and mad, he says quite respectfully and seems in control. I'm not out of my mind the most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and irrational words. The King knows about these.

And to him, I speak boldly. So his response is one of calm, respectful reason. He maintains simply that he's not insane and probably all in the court who were listening recognized that he wasn't insane. It wasn't a fair claim, a challenge against him. He maintains his faith is based on truth and reason. And nothing, he says, that has been done in the progression of the Christian gospel was done in secret. It was all public and it was open to the scrutiny of all to see. That's very important, I think for us. It's important for us today if we are provoked. And when the gospel and those who believe in the gospel are challenged for believing in something without any reason, without any truth as fantasists or flat earthers, that we allow ourselves to take the time to express the reason behind what we believe in.

The historical fact, the assessment of life, the creation around us, the reality of good and evil, the reality of life and death, our own creativity, our conscience, our consciousness, our morality, all of these things that we believe find an answer in the gospel and in Jesus Christ. It is based on that reason. People might not like that, may choose to reject it, but it is not fantasy. And it's important for us to be able to share that truth. And the gospel has always been open to intellectual scrutiny, probably has been rigorously examined and looked at more than any other truth claim that has ever been made. And yet people's lives are still being transformed and people are still come to know the risen Savior, people from every class, every society, every intellectual strata, despite what the media will tell us, are coming to faith in the risen Savior. Don't lose heart. Continue with reason and with gentleness and with respect to maintain why you believe. And added to that is the very interesting second foundation that Paul responds with in verse 29, where in response to King

[26 : 42] Agrippa he says, Paul said, whether short time or long, I would to God that not only you, but all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains. Isn't that a great answer? Isn't that a humble, prayerful answer? A great comeback, isn't it? That he exposes and he reveals his own heart that as he is sharing this gospel, he recognizes his dependence on the living God. He has shared his truth passionately and respectfully, but he wants God to open the hearts of everyone there, the soldiers who are guarding him, Festus, Agrippa, Candice, all the people who are there. He wants them to come and know the Lord Jesus Christ and be like him, except for his chains. He doesn't want them wearing handcuffs. He has a longing for them to be free men and women and free, of course, spiritually.

He wants them to know the love of God that's transformed his life and offered him the forgiveness as the greatest of all rebels and the one who was most culpable against Jesus for what he was doing in the early church and was transformed by that Damascus road experience.

And I hope that that is, for us as Christians today, is also our longing as we often live lives where we feel powerless and small and voiceless and in a huge minority and where everyone tells us that we are crazy to be Christians or that we will never persuade others to come to faith, that we will know where the power to transform hearts and lives lies. It lies with the living God as Paul was willing to pray that God would act to transform their lives. So let us be people who share our testimony by the way we live, by our grace, by our respect, by our humility, by our love, by our patience, by our long suffering, by our willingness to go the extra mile, by the way we treat those who treat us badly as we treat them with love and seek to do. As we share our lives and our testimony, as we defend the reasonableness of our faith, may we assure people of our prayers. It is a great thing, isn't it, to pray for people, pray for each other as Christians. But I think also a lot of times people who aren't Christians, who are our friends, who are maybe wrestling with issues of faith are very happy to know that we will pray for them and that we are praying for them and that we can assure them of our faith that they too might come to know Jesus

Christ and Him crucified and all that it means for this life and the life to come. And I hope if you are not a Christian today, if you are visiting with us today, that you will be challenged by the truths of Jesus and by the worship that we have shared in today and by the message from the gospel. It is one that we seek to live, we make lots of mistakes, we fail miserably in so many ways, but we long for people to share the Christ who has transformed our lives and we pray for that, irregularly, for our friends and neighbours and family members to come to faith in Jesus Christ. And it is something that through baptism that we believe is a significant truth and promise for our children.

Amen. May God bless His word that we have heard and considered together.