

## **“A POSTCARD FROM JERUSALEM”**

*Acts 21:17 – 23:22*

We move on this morning to the next leg of Paul’s journey around the Mediterranean area. Last week, Alan told us about the time Paul spent in Caesarea and the prophecy of Agabus, which warned Paul that he was in for trouble if he went on. But Paul is literally a man on a mission, and dire warnings are not going to stop him, so he moves on to Jerusalem, where this morning’s postcard comes from. [Picture on screen – anachronisms: there’s a church and a mosque in view!] As he meets James in Jerusalem, there’s no point sending him a postcard, so this one is to Priscilla and Aquila whom he left back in Ephesus on a previous journey. [Postcard on screen.]

When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he meets up with the other believers, pretty well all of whom would have been Jewish people. The little party with whom Paul is travelling – including Dr Luke: note that he’s using “*us*” and “*we*” here – go to see James. He’s the leader of the church in the city and really the leader of the Jewish section of the church. Eventually he is seen to be the first Bishop of the Church and he wrote the letter that bears his name. He is also the brother of Jesus, which gave him a certain seniority in the church at the time. The meeting with James and the believers in Jerusalem is described by Luke as warm, and they were no doubt also very grateful for the money which Paul had brought as a result of the collections he’d made in the various places he had visited on his long journey around the eastern Mediterranean.

But Paul is not universally welcomed in the city. The tension between the Jewish and Gentile believers is still a live issue and there are a number of the Jewish believers who still cling very closely to the old ways of Judaism, particularly those that they consider to be part of their cultural heritage (21:21). They don’t take kindly to Paul coming along and seemingly denying their cultural roots. And as the story goes on we discover that there are a good number of non-Christian Jews who are vehemently opposed to Paul. Luke mentions that they are from the Province of Asia, so they have come across him preaching in places like Ephesus and Galatia, so know what he’s about and want to stir up the Jews in Jerusalem against him. What’s more, there is a rumour going around (which Luke implies is untrue) that Paul has taken a Gentile, Trophimus the Ephesian, into the holy places of the Temple (21:29).

So, despite the warm welcome from James and many of the believers, Paul is coming into a pretty difficult and dangerous situation. This is not going to be easy. He faces trouble in the church, which could be very divisive indeed. He is physically attacked by Jews in the Temple. He finds himself arrested (for his own protection to begin with) by the Roman authorities. He is the victim of mistaken identity (21:38). And at the end of his stay in Jerusalem (in the part we didn’t read this morning) he faces a threat to his life from a group of over forty highly motivated assassins (23:12-15). It’s not really very good news, is it?

How does Paul respond to these various situations? Well, he seems to heed the advice of Jesus when he sent out the first twelve disciples. If you look at the way Matthew records it in his gospel, you’ll see that Jesus warns his followers about such opposition (*Matthew 10:15-20*). But he tells them what their attitude should be in *Matthew 10:16* – they are to be “*shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*”. So it’s interesting – and instructive – to note Paul’s approach to all this. It’s a question of **Compromise and Confrontation**. But the trick is knowing what to do when.

### **COMPROMISE**

For many people, compromise is a dirty word. It means selling out, giving up your principles, watering down the gospel and all that kind of stuff. Well, let’s look at what it means for Paul during his torrid time in Jerusalem.

#### **1. Taking part in Jewish ritual (21:22-26)**

James is a wise leader. He knows that Paul's arrival is going to cause problems with the Jewish believers who don't want to give up all their cultural tradition. So he has a plan worked out. There are four men who are preparing for a purification ritual. It was a way of expressing their devotion to God and involved them making a financial offering and having their heads shaved as a way of letting people know what they were doing. It didn't involve offering a sacrifice or doing any of the things that were actually incompatible with the message of liberty in Jesus. As far as we can tell, they were doing it on their own initiative and not under any duress. Why doesn't Paul join them? In that way he could show that he is not ashamed of his Jewish heritage and it will win him many friends in the community of Jewish believers.

Paul appears to have no problem with this, Presumably he respects the wisdom of James, who knows the local situation, and realises that this is not something that is at the very heart of the Gospel. By so doing he is not in any way going against the message of Jesus and it fits in very well with what he has told the Corinthian Christians in *1 Corinthians 9:19-23*. For him this is a mission opportunity and it's not a time to stick up for ideas that aren't really crucial to the message of the gospel and the mission of Christ.

There are all kinds of things that some Christians see as selling out, as compromising the gospel. Ecumenism, wearing robes or a clerical collar, lighting candles in church, witnessing in the pub, allowing women to preach (as Alan was talking about last week), using church buildings for activities that are not specifically Christian, giving thanks for the birth of babies born out of wedlock, baptising people who have been christened, remarrying those who have been divorced: they're all things that I've been taken to task for at some time or other. But none of those things is central to the message of the gospel. None of them compromise the message of Jesus Christ, which is a message of grace, of forgiveness, of inclusiveness. They have all opened up opportunities for witness and have drawn people closer to the Jesus Christ who spoke with women, who healed on the Sabbath, who touched the lepers, who turned over the tables in the Temple courtyard. They all fall into the same kind of category as Paul's agreeing to have his head shaved and make an offering in the Temple. Let us not compromise the grace of Jesus Christ by exercising our faith – and forcing others to exercise their faith – in some kind of narrow and legalistic way.

## **2. Insisting on his legal rights (22:24-29)**

This is another part of the story that we didn't have time to read this morning. The Roman commander gets Paul ready to be flogged and Paul suddenly queries the legality of this. He is a Roman citizen, by virtue of his birth in Tarsus (we're not sure exactly how), and the flogging of Roman citizens was strictly forbidden by law. It puts the commander in a very embarrassing position as he hadn't know that Paul had Roman citizenship, but it does get Paul off the punishment.

Now Paul was well aware of the evil nature of the Roman Empire. If you read, for example, his *Letter To The Colossians*, you will see that there's an awful lot that he finds to oppose. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat's commentary *Colossians Re:mixed – Subverting The Empire* is a great book about the way in which Christianity was wholly opposed to the mindset of the Roman Empire. Yet here he is, identifying himself with that Empire and actually benefitting from it. He seems to have no qualms about letting people know that he is a Roman citizen as well as a Jew. It actually brings him a great deal of advantage here. Obviously, it saves him from being flogged: it possibly even saves him from death. And it also opens up new opportunities for witness. A dead apostle might be a martyr, but he doesn't have too many opportunities to preach the gospel. Although, as he tells the Philippian Christians in his letter to them, he'd much rather be with Jesus, he recognises that there is still work for him to do as a living evangelist. And as the story unfolds, there will be opportunities to share the gospel with his captors as well as those whom he meets on his way to the Appeal Court in Rome (but that's for another Sunday).

Again, there are those Christians who insist that we should keep ourselves completely separate from the civic and state authorities. God has called us to get on with the task of mission without getting mixed up in all that kind of stuff. But there are many occasions, it seems to me, when we can make use of the structures and advantages of the secular authorities. We may not find ourselves having to insist on our

rights as citizens, but there are plenty of other ways in which we can use the life of the community for the good of the Gospel – or, as Walsh and Keesmaat put it, “*Subvert the Empire*”. I used to talk a lot about evangelism by subversion – getting involved in non-Christian stuff and slowly using it to proclaim the message of the Gospel. In some ways it is reclaiming our Christian heritage – asking to be involved in the city’s Christmas celebrations, getting stuck in to the Lichfield Mysteries, making the most of chaplaincy opportunities that are still around, clearly presenting the gospel in school assemblies (as prescribed by the 1988 Education Act). And don’t let the *Daily Mail*-reading panic-merchants convince you that we are no longer allowed to talk about what we believe: that’s just part of the plan of the Evil One to undermine our confidence in the Gospel. Just as Paul insisted on his rights as a citizen under Roman law, we should still be insisting on our rights to free speech, on our rights to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion under British law.

### **3. Apologising when necessary (23:5)**

When Paul was taken before the Sanhedrin, he ended up calling the High Priest a hypocrite and angrily criticising his actions. The other members of the Council point out to Paul that he should not be insulting the High Priest and Paul appears to apologise to him – not because of who he is, but because of what he is, because of the office he holds. Now, we don’t know the tone of voice Paul used, and some have suggested that he was actually being sarcastic here, but I think he was genuinely apologetic. Whatever else he may have been, Paul was always respectful of authority. We know that Paul had problems with his eyesight (as he tells the Philippians), so it may be that he genuinely did not recognise the High Priest and he was speaking out of ignorance – although he clearly made his point, even if he did feel the need to apologise.

Ananias the High Priest was one of the most hated High Priests that Israel ever had. He was known for his cruelty and violence and was eventually assassinated by his own people during the revolt against Rome about fifteen years later. Although he was very much an opponent of Paul, there was no particular reason for Paul to antagonise him and he seems to have been willing to acknowledge his error.

Unfortunately, apologising when in the wrong is not always a characteristic of Christians. It’s probably as much a cultural thing as anything else: we live in a culture where no-one ever wants to take the blame, for fear of litigation perhaps, and no-one wants to admit failure, for fear of losing face. Those who constantly insist that they are right, or refuse to back down when their position is actually untenable can make themselves very unpopular – especially when they claim that God is on their side. Relationships can be spoiled and opportunities for witness can be lost. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge your mistakes and be prepared to apologise if necessary.

But Paul was not simply a wimp who gave in every time there was a conflict. We know from what he wrote in the *Letter To The Galatians*, that he was prepared to stand up to the Apostle Peter himself when the core of the gospel was being compromised. And here we see that when it really is a question of the truth of the message of Jesus Christ, Paul is not afraid of confrontation too.

## **CONFRONTATION**

Part of the problem of our Christian witness is that we have for too long taken our stand on the inconsequential aspects of the faith. And, by the same measure, another part of the problem is that we have failed to stand up for the really foundational aspects of the faith. Paul has been dragged out of the Temple (21:30), badly beaten in an attempt to kill him (21:31), and arrested and chained up (21:33). But at the heart of the disorder is Paul’s insistence on the Gospel of grace, a message that has transformed his life and he knows can transform the lives of others. So he makes the most of the opportunity of being on the steps of the barracks and surrounded by Roman soldiers to preach the Gospel to the mob.

I think I’ve told you before of an incident involving my brother in France. He was doing some open-air evangelism in a little market square to a fairly small group of bored bystanders, when someone called the police. A couple of minutes later some vans arrived carrying members of the CRS, the French riot police,

who bundled out of the vehicles and ran up to the mission team. If the CRS turn up, people know there's going to be some action – they make the old SPG in the Met look like amateurs. A crowd suddenly formed waiting for blood to flow, but my brother managed to satisfy the police that they were doing nothing wrong, so they got back in their vans and left. But there was by now a huge and curious crowd ready to preach to – and that's just what they did!

And then, strapped down ready to be flogged, Paul (the apostle, not my brother, by the way) challenged the commander. He was not in a terribly strong position, but he wasn't going to let this pass and told the Romans that they had no right to do this to him. He was not going to be cowed into submission and confronted the injustice that he was experiencing.

Finally, as he stood before the Sanhedrin, the most powerful council of the Jewish people, Paul, having apologised to the High Priest, then went on to tell them that what this was all about was a non-negotiable aspect of his faith – the resurrection of the dead. He was not afraid to let them know where he stood – although it was also a rather clever ploy, as we read in 23:7-9. Once again, the argument turns into a fight (though not with Paul this time) and gets so violent that the Romans have to come in and restore the peace once more.

Here is Paul – the same Paul that had compromised and cajoled – standing confidently on the truth of the Gospel. He knew what the important things were and he wasn't going to let them be ignored or lost in the general debate and uproar. He was certainly being shrewd in the judgements that he made and the battles he chose to fight. In that he is a great example – a great role model – not only for Christian leaders (who may find their ministry in a constant tension between compromise and confrontation), but for all Christians. Day by day we are faced with choices as we try to witness for Christ: do we compromise or do we confront? We need the help of the Holy Spirit to help us discern which are the battles we really do need to fight and which are the ones we can graciously concede or leave to another occasion. One of the more cunning plans of the Devil is to get us all worked up about the things that don't really matter so that we neglect to get involved in the things that really do matter. If you have ever read *The Screwtape Letters* by C S Lewis, you will see there the ways in which the senior devil encourages his young apprentice to get believers to focus on the inconsequential at the expense of the non-negotiable. Never, ever give up on the great truths of the Gospel – but don't allow yourself to get side-tracked into petty discussions and debates. And, like Paul, be prepared to use any means to share the Gospel with those around you.

Then, like Paul, you will be able to see God's will being done. Just a very brief post-script to all this. There are a couple of little comments that Luke includes here that show us that this is all part of God's plan: his purposes are going to be accomplished come what may. In 21:14, which we looked at last week, after Agabus has failed to dissuade Paul from continuing his journey, everyone says "*The Lord's will be done*". And at the end of this section, in 23:11, God says to Paul, "*Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.*" God's purposes are being fulfilled. The Gospel is being proclaimed. Nothing stands in the way of God's will being done. Take courage this morning – and keep following the way of Jesus.

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### **COMPROMISE**

#### **1. Taking part in Jewish ritual (21:22-26)**

Paul joins four men preparing for a rite of purification. In that way he could show that he is not ashamed of his Jewish heritage and it will win him many friends in the community of Jewish believers. (Look at *1 Corinthians 9:19-23*.) Let us not compromise the grace of Jesus Christ by exercising our faith – and forcing others to exercise their faith – in some kind of narrow and legalistic way.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "compromise"?
2. What kinds of things do we think of as compromise in our Christian witness? Is it ever right to compromise? When?
3. We hear a lot today about our "rights". What should be our attitude as Christians to such things?
4. Why do you think we are often slow to apologise? What are the advantages (and disadvantages) of apologising?
5. What would you say are the foundational aspects of our faith on which it is never right to compromise?
6. Do you have any examples of occasions when you have had either to compromise or to confront?

