

SERMON – St. Paul a Cameo of his missionary life

It is not likely, but not impossible that someone in the church today has done an in depth study of Paul and his missionary journeys. But even if someone has, that leaves the remainder of us remembering little snippets of readings we have heard over the decades. We have a vague memory that he was in Corinth, or that he caused a riot in Ephesus or that he landed up in jail on some occasion, when he had somehow insulted the local citizens or their gods. But we would be any of us hard pressed to pass a test on the subject. Rest assured, we are not going to attempt that in depth study nor will there be a test at the end of the service. But it struck me as I was reading one of the passages set for today, in Acts 16, that here we had been given a little cameo of some of Paul's character traits. So I propose to spend a few minutes studying this portion of Scripture to see what it reveals to us about one of Christianity's most significant missionaries. After all, without Paul, there would probably be no modern Christian Church.

Luke tells us in the Acts chapter 16 that whilst in Turkey, on one of his journeys, Paul received what he believed to be an instruction from God to travel across the Aegean to Macedonia, to preach the Good News about Jesus. Macedonia in the ancient world would be approximately in modern day northern Greece. Paul landed up in Philippi, a city originally founded by Philip of Macedon, father of one Alexander the Great. The city was famed for its nearby gold mines, but by the time of St. Paul, was a Roman colony. Paul and his then companion, Silas, spent an action packed time there. And thus is revealed Paul's first significant character trait. Paul lived dangerously. He would no doubt be called an "Adrenalin Junky" these days. Having been invited by some individual or even sent by the Holy Spirit, he would set off to some strange country or city to preach his message. Having arrived, he would go first to the Synagogue, hoping for a warm religious family welcome. But in city after city it was the same result. He and his companion would be thrown out, with accompanying threats. The Jews did not want to hear his message about Jesus, because it did not involve keeping all the Jewish laws.

Believing himself to be sent by God to the Gentiles, he would make his way down to the river or to other places where God-fearing pagans met. There he would repeat his message, assuring them that they did not have to become Jews first, keeping all the Jewish Laws. This proved very attractive to women, who were excluded from much of Judaism and to men who were reluctant to adopt Judaism because of the requirement to be circumcised. Paul reassured those gathered that all sorts of folk were welcome and could be saved: women, men, slaves, foreigners, all were equal before God. Those who accepted his message would be baptised, and some would even invite Paul to stay with them whilst in the city. As you can imagine this would draw curious crowds. When news got around that Paul was telling his converts that they had only to stick to the basics ie not eating meat offered to idols, not living sexually promiscuous lives and not burning incense to

the emperor, then trouble began. Hostile citizens and authorities would charge Paul with anti-Roman activities and he would be flogged and thrown in Jail. Acts 16 tells us of just such an occasion. A timely earthquake resulted in his eventual setting free. Well, he would travel in earthquake prone parts of the world.

Throughout the long history of the Christian church there have been many periods when living dangerously was a normal part of the Christian life. Early on many were martyred for their faith. At different times slightly disagreeing with the prevailing official teaching, could have you killed or at the very least tortured. The Inquisition and the Reformation are two such periods. British church history has its own examples – assassinations and burnings at the stake come to mind. Today in many parts of the world, to profess faith in Christ can result in persecution or even death. Just living the Christian life can mean living dangerously. So living dangerously was not restricted to St. Paul.

Another aspect of Paul's character was that he was not afraid to travel far and wide – brave behaviour, at least for someone living 2000 years ago. You could say that he was adventurous on behalf of Christ. With the help of splendid Roman roads and many seaworthy boats, Paul covered hundreds of miles, back and forth across the Mediterranean on behalf of the Gospel. As far as he was concerned the sore feet, the empty stomach, the danger and the weariness, were prices worth paying to reach as many Gentile folk as he could, for the sake of Jesus and his message.

But why was Paul prepared to travel so far and often in so much danger? He did it because he was convinced of his message. Admittedly, God in Jesus, had gone to great lengths to get his attention in the early days of Christianity. Paul had been prepared for his task by God, with a strict rabbinical training. He knew all about the Law. But it came as a nasty shock to him when he was confronted on the Damascus Road by a vision of Jesus. Jesus told him that he was to stop persecuting Christians and use that training to attract non-Jews to worshipping God and accepting Jesus as His Son. Whatever it was that Paul experienced on that Journey to Damascus, it was sufficiently profound that it ruled his life ever after.

Why did Paul need to be so convinced of his message? Simply, he needed to be so that he could tolerate all the obstructions put in his way. Fellow Christians, mainly from the Jerusalem church, followed him around Asia Minor trying to undermine his teachings, confuse new Christians and sow dissension. In Acts 16, he and Silas encounter a slave girl with supposed spiritual gifts who is being exploited by unscrupulous folk. Paul eventually loses his temper at the unwanted attention and takes a common ancient action, namely that of banishing what is believed to be an evil spirit. The slave owners seeing their profits disappear, encourage an angry mob to report him to the magistrates. Bad publicity dogged his footsteps. He met with other riotous mobs, hell bent on running him out of town or possibly even

killing him. He met with unfriendly, sinister folk and rough weather on his sea journeys. He had to tolerate several periods in jail, sometimes lasting years. And he was plagued by some chronic problem, to which many references are made, but no description is ever given.

Reading about Paul reminds me of a more modern missionary by the name of Hudson Taylor. Some of you may have read about him. In the 19C Hudson Taylor believed himself to be called by God to go and preach the Gospel in China. The Mission Society to which he applied, did not agree with him. Unperturbed and still convinced, he went on to raise sufficient support and finances to start his own mission society, the China Inland Mission and he went anyway. And that really was living dangerously.

The final aspect of Paul's character that is revealed to us in Acts 16, is that he took advantage of opportunities when they arose. In other words, he struck while the iron was hot. When he met up with God-fearing folk, he straightaway taught them about Jesus, and baptised them on the spot, if appropriate. When hospitality was offered he would stay with local folk and talk to them further about the Gospel. It must be said, that on this occasion in Philippi, it might be considered, by some, that preaching to a terrified jailer in the aftermath of an earthquake, might have been slightly insensitive. Also it is hard to imagine that the jailer's mind would be on spiritual matters as the stones came raining down on him. But Paul took his opportunities when they arose, even to the point of baptising a whole household in the middle of the night!

We as members of the Christian community are also called upon to share the Gospel with those we meet. But I believe that we should be more sensitive than St. Paul may have been. Shyness may be more of a consideration to us in Britain than danger. We do not have to travel far and wide looking for opportunities to share our faith. Our society is full of people who are very interested in spiritual matters, but who have no one to discuss them with. Often it can be seen in our lives, engaged in living out the Gospel, that spiritual matters are important to us. Opportunities will arise to share our faith with interested folk, and we should take them when they do. You would be surprised at how many times the Almighty has had a hand in prompting questions or piqueing curiosity. If we feel unsure about our message, then we could start by regular reading of Scripture, for information and spiritual enlightenment. After that we could approach church leaders about the possibility of some classes or more study groups. We could join the group that already exists. There is no need to hesitate. Many folk think that because they may be longstanding members of the church that they are expected to know everything about Christianity. Impossible. We all learn different things at different times in our lives. Remember, even Jesus did not know when the world was going to end, and he had direct access to the most important source of that kind of knowledge.