

Study 10 3/4/14

Christ our Hope

Acts 26:1-29 (with 1 Tim. 1:1)

The setting

Paul has been kept waiting in Caesarea for two years when the new governor Festus arrives. The Governor takes an early journey to Jerusalem where Jews approach him regarding Paul. They still hope to assassinate him but are foiled by Festus saying the matter will be settled in Caesarea. The Jews waste no time getting there, but the charges they bring against him are no more convincing than before (Acts 25:7). Paul is innocent of any charges brought with regard to either Jewish (particularly their temple) or Roman law. Festus is little better than Felix, wanting to keep Jews happy, and asks if Paul is prepared to face trial in Jerusalem. Again, Paul sees no future in this charade and appeals to Caesar. The Lord has already explained to him that the Jews in Jerusalem will not accept his testimony.

Herod Agrippa II is a fourth generation Herod. His great grandfather, Herod the Great, had tried to murder the infant Jesus. His father had murdered the apostle James (12:1-2), and then came to a sorry end under God's judgement (12:21-23). Agrippa's capital is in Caesarea Philippi (towards Damascus) but he comes to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast for a visit just a few days after Paul has appealed to Caesar. Festus takes the opportunity to deal with the Paul question—what charge to write when sending him on to Rome. From his point of view, the matter is incomprehensible—involving Jewish law and the raising of a dead man (25:19). Then again, he should remember his father's end in this city and be careful not to mess with Israel's God! However, like his father, he loves glamour (v. 23).

The sermon

We are looking for what is on the heart and mind of Paul in this speech rather than a technique to follow in Gentile evangelism. The Church grows, not by its method but by its truth. As Jesus says, 'Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45).

Paul says he is fortunate to be tried by this man because he has studied Jewish affairs. In fact, he is sought out by Rome for advice in these matters. Paul's good fortune is not that he will be treated better than previously but that Agrippa may be starting from a higher point than some others with regard to the truth.

Paul shows he is faithful to his calling as a Jew, first, as a strict Pharisee; his accusers can vouch for that (**Acts 26:4-5**). But he remains a faithful Jew because *he has embraced the hope* for which all Jews (or most of them) want to be worthy (**vv. 6-7**), and this is the issue of his trial. The real question is not why Paul hopes but why Israel doesn't—that is, hope for resurrection (**v. 8**). Why should this be thought incredible? Anyone knowing the Scriptures, and God's power should have come to this hope (as in Matthew 22:29).

The testimony Paul gives follows similar lines to the one given to the Jerusalem crowd and shows that he (unlike unbelieving Jews) is open to the Christ of which the Scriptures speak. He confesses his earlier *conflict with Christ* (**vv. 9-11**; cf. 22:3-5); his *conversion to Christ* (**vv. 12-15**; cf. 22:6-13); and his *redirection by Christ* to Gentiles (**vv. 16-17**; cf. 22:14-15). He gives a fuller version of what Christ said to him as he neared Damascus including it being hard for him to kick against Christ's goading of him. Paul has proved the truth of the proverb, '...the way of the treacherous is hard' (Prov. 13:15) but has also learned that he cannot match the power of Christ (1 Cor. 10:22).

This fuller version of how Christ addressed him says he must open the eyes of people (as the Lord opened his eyes) so they will turn from Satan to God and live in obedience to him (v. 18; as in Col. 1:12-14). Gentiles as well as Jews need forgiveness, and a place to belong amongst all the people God sanctifies—sanctifies, not by their sacrifices but by this gospel, and sanctified so they can participate in the hope of Israel (20:32; Tit. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:3, 13).

Paul continues to be obedient (vv. 19-20), not as he was before, to the dead tradition of Judaism, but to the heavenly vision anticipated by the Scriptures and revealed in Christ.

Paul now identifies that his claim to be sent by Christ to the Gentiles (and his supposedly being in the temple with Gentiles) is the real reason he has been accosted by Jews (v. 21; with 22:21-22), something he avoided doing before (24:18-19). It is this vision of a church including Gentiles (cf. Eph. 3) that has landed him in trouble with the Jews but which he cannot sacrifice in the interests of his safety. They need their eyes opened! And the glory of God needs to be seen in the unity of Gentiles with Jews in the joy of the gospel.

Again, Paul says his message is nothing other than what the Scriptures announced (vv. 22-23)—that Christ would suffer and be raised from the dead, and, being the first to arise from the dead, could bring light to both Jews and Gentiles. He has brought life and immortality to light (2 Tim. 1:10)!

Paul has written that the power of the gospel is in preaching the cross (1 Cor. 1:18) but the word of the cross is the word of a resurrected Christ. Perhaps for this reason, Paul says he wants to know the power of the resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil. 3:10), in that order. There would be no power in a merely crucified Christ, but then, it is not possible for him to be held by death because he has defeated it (2 Tim. 2:10). In the power of his resurrection, Christ announces that he is the hope of all the nations.

Israel's hope started with a son who would conquer Satan, the enemy who led humanity into *death* (Gen. 3:15). It continued with blessing for all nations through Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) and his faith that God could raise the *dead* (Rom. 4:17-25). It focused in David and his son (2 Sam. 7:12-16). All subsequent hopes are spoken of in Davidic terms. The nation seems not to inherit the blessing or walk in the victory, but, in the midst of this failure, prophets show that God will fulfill his purpose and take away the *shroud* hanging over humanity (Isa. 25:7; 60:2). This Messiah will be the son of Adam, of Abraham and of David who will lead his people in blessing and victory over sin and *death*. No one connected the sad history of this Messiah being also the Suffering Servant, but come he did. Even though he bore our iniquities, he now 'prolongs his days' and the will of the Lord prospers in his hands (Isa. 53:10).

The Jews have not seen what is theirs. On the other hand, Paul has a wholly Christ-centred Scripture and a living Christ who fulfills Israel's hope through the gospel. By raising his Son from death, God himself is calling the nations to account (as in Isa. 45:23).

The sequel

Festus rudely interjects (vv. 24-32) saying Paul is mad, but Paul avers that he has spoken sober truth. Paul prefers to address Agrippa who has studied Israel's prophecies, and the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. (This highlights the importance of our Gospels, written, as Luke's is, that we may know the certainty of these things.) Agrippa should know there is no reasonable case against Jesus fulfilling Israel's scriptures. The resurrection is well attested and the links of this with Jewish anticipations of God's coming again to their rescue are undisputable.

But Agrippa is not so eager to be flushed out as a believer in Christ and can only mock Paul about trying to convert him. Paul, in genuine love could wish Agrippa to be as he is, in Christ, but without the chains. Again, Rome can find no fault in this apostle, and, as Jesus said, such opportunities are the way the truth is proclaimed in the highest courts of the land. And next, to Rome.