



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Acts 26

Background to the reading

In our text there are a few details we have to clarify.

Agrippa was actually Agrippa II the king of the Jews and Bernice was his sister. They were both very loyal to Rome and made a big fuss over the Roman Governors in Judea. It is no coincidence that they visited the Roman Governor Festus in Caesarea. The city Caesarea was named in honor of Augustus Caesar, built by Herod the Great from 22 to 10 BC. The city lies 25 miles south of modern Haifa, in the beautiful Plain of Sharon on Israel's Mediterranean coast. It was also known as Caesarea Maritima. It became the administrative centre of the country throughout the period of Roman occupation. Three Roman governors of Palestine lived there: Felix, Festus, and Pontius Pilate, who visited Jerusalem on special occasions. Caesarea served as the major seaport of Judea in New Testament times. Since the southern Palestinian coastline lacked a good harbour, Herod created one by building two huge breakwaters that could shelter ships from Mediterranean storms.

The Roman governor Festus was bewildered by Paul's religious convictions. There was a dispute between Paul and the Sanhedrin which continued after the retirement of the previous governor Felix. Upon the arrival of Festus in Jerusalem, the official capital of his province, the Jews besought him to send Paul from Caesarea to Jerusalem to appear before them, intending to kill him on the way. Festus at first refused their request, and upon his return to Caesarea proceeded himself to examine Paul. But on finding that the evidence was conflicting, and reflecting that, as the accused was apparently charged on religious rather than on political grounds, the Sanhedrin was a more suitable court for his case than a Roman tribunal, he asked Paul if he were agreeable to make the journey to Jerusalem. But Paul as a Roman citizen, made his appeal unto Caesar. To this request of a Roman citizen accused on a capital charge, Festus had no other choice than to give his consent.

Meantime King Agrippa and Bernice had arrived in Caesarea, and to these Festus gave a brief explanation of the circumstances. The previous audiences of Festus with Paul and his accusers had, however, served only to confuse him as to the exact nature of the charge. Paul was therefore summoned before the stately court, in order both that Agrippa might hear him, and that the governor might obtain more definite information for insertion in the report he was required to send along with the prisoner to Rome.

On receiving permission from the judge (in this case, unofficially Agrippa), one could speak. Paul's hand is stretched forth in customary rhetorical style; gestures were an important part of ancient training in public speaking. There was a standard of defence speeches that varied somewhat in form but had general consistency, as exhibited here: the address to the judge (verses 2–3), the *narratio* (narration of events—verses 4–18) and finally the *argumentio* (proof of the case—verses 19–23). When he addresses the king, he uses the *exordium* of the speech, in which it was customary to praise the judge. Paul is able to do so honestly. The last king from the house of Herod was known as someone who was interested in the Jewish law, and his realm became a safe haven for Jewish practice after the Jewish-Roman war of 66–70.

From verses 4 to 11 he tells his life story. We know that Paul was a native of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, a Roman province in the south-east of Asia Minor. That city stood on the banks of the river Cydnus, and it became a centre of extensive commercial traffic with many countries along the shores of the Mediterranean, as well as with the countries of central Asia Minor. It was a city distinguished for the wealth of its inhabitants. His father was of the strictest sect of the Jews, a Pharisee, of the tribe of Benjamin, of pure and unmixed Jewish blood. Though a Jew, his father was a Roman citizen. How he obtained this privilege we are not informed. "It might be bought, or won by distinguished service to the state, or acquired in several other ways; at all events, his son was freeborn. It was a valuable privilege, and one that was to prove of great use to Paul, although not in the way in which his father might have been expected to desire him to make use of it. Roman citizenship, helped him not in one city only, but throughout the Roman world and secured for him everywhere certain great immunities and rights like exemption from shameful punishments, such as whipping with rods or whips, crucifixion, and the right of appeal to the emperor with certain limitations.

According to Jewish custom, however, Paul learned a trade before entering on the more direct preparation for the sacred profession. The trade he acquired was the making of tents from goats' hair cloth, a trade which was one of the commonest in Tarsus.

It is interesting to see how Paul uses all kinds of metaphors and sayings from the Jewish and Greek world to explain what happened to him. Agrippa would have known all this because he was also exposed just like Paul to both cultures. Verse 14 is no exception. The saying: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" was a Greek proverb about fighting a god, possibly originating with the classical Greek playwright Euripides. It is not cited in the other accounts of Paul's conversion, but it is appropriate in an address to Agrippa, who had an ample Greek education.

A Roman aristocrat like Festus may dislike Paul's mission to move Gentiles to repent, but he would not understand the Jewish opposition. Agrippa II, who had pagan friends and knew well the mounting animosity of Judean Jewry against Gentiles, would understand Paul all too well, and it is to him that Paul directs these words.

Paul says that he has done nothing wrong. The Christian faith is no secret. Christian claims are public facts, dismissed or ignored by others only because of the others' prejudice. Festus reacted by saying: "You are out of your mind, Paul! Agrippa reacted by saying: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Yet the meeting was sufficient to convince both Agrippa and Festus that Paul did not deserve the death penalty. However because Paul had used his Roman right to appeal to Caesar's tribunal, Agrippa and Festus can only refer him there with a letter specifying their own opinion. This appeal had earlier saved Paul's life and now it provided him free passage to Rome and a public forum for the gospel there.

Sermon

Text verse for the sermon: ²⁸ *Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* ²⁹ *Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."*

We have entered the season of Lent. Lent is from Ash Wednesday to Easter. The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer — through prayer, repentance which recalls the events linked to the suffering of Christ and culminates in Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Lent is like experiencing a very hard journey but where the outcome is great!

Let me explain:

Imagine that you are looking forward to a long awaited journey to Malta. You are very excited. But then it starts snowing on the morning you are supposed to fly: the taxi to take you and your family to the airport is late, and when you arrive at the airport your flight is delayed for 6 hours. Then after waiting six hours, with the snow not stopping, you are told you have to go home again. They will call you! And then after three days of waiting and a lot of tension in your family, you are told there will be no holiday!

Can you imagine how you would be feeling? Yes pretty much devastated. But then after five days you get a call from the travel company to say that they are offering your whole family a week's holiday at Disney World in Orlando, Florida all expenses paid! Can you imagine your joy and excitement and the new mood in your home?

Well that is exactly like Lent. It is like having a very bad journey full of difficulties but in the end the outcome is fantastic! Jesus did not have a great time journeying on earth but in the end He made it possible for all the believers to have entrance to heaven which is much better than a holiday at Disney World.

Paul knew this pretty well. He is an example to us all. His journey on earth had many downs but he was never discouraged. Paul had a lot of opportunity to desert his faith in the Lord. He could have just stayed quiet or used lies to get him off the hook. But Jesus' redemption made him speak. He allowed God's Spirit to work through him

reaching out to others. God's mercy and glory were bigger than his own. His example of sacrifice spoke harder than any words.

Lent is about being a witness of journeying with Jesus. It is a journey full of temptations, trials and struggles. Daily we are tempted to desert our faith, denounce our hope and live in hatred. But it is also a journey of joy to give God the Glory for all the miracles that happen each day.

I guess we have a choice this Lent. We can be Christians only in name or we can be practising Christians who seriously follow Jesus by our sacrifice, through our words and deeds and through our love.

Lent is the courtroom where we can be witnesses like Paul to attest to the redemption of Jesus Christ. We can be the key witnesses to redeem and acquit someone in chains of guilt to a new life of freedom in Christ. We can through our actions of Christian love help others to find the love of God too.

May we travel light this Lent with faith, hope and love as our only baggage wherever we go!

Amen