

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!'
Acts 12.9-10.

The Bible book we've been studying is not really the *Acts of the Apostles*, but the *Acts of the Holy Spirit*. Paul and Barnabas going out on their first missionary journey couldn't survive without the Spirit enabling them to preach *Jesus* as Lord to a Roman State for whom only *Caesar* was lord. It's no different today. On your own as a Christian you feel timid and shy. It's only the Holy Spirit in you that helps you to speak up and stand up for Jesus. Pray, then, for the Spirit.

Luke, the author of *Acts*, underlines the point in v4, here on p1107 ... By the *Spirit* they sail to Cyprus. NB in v5 how Paul and Barnabas preach *first* in the Jewish synagogue ... Though many Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah, they were still God's people. Later Paul and Barnabas arrived at Paphos, and here the fun started. They met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet called Bar-jesus (also known as Elymas). (By the way, *bar* is the Aramaic word for 'son', as in *Bar-nabas*, *Bar-abbas*, *Bar-timaeus*. The Hebrew word is *ben*, and the Arabic is *bin*. *Jesus* is simply the Greek form of the common name, Joshua).

This Bar-jesus (or Elymas) was clearly offering some sort of spiritual guidance to Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul of Cyprus. V7b tells us that Sergius Paulus was a bright man who soon recognised the real thing in Paul and Barnabas... So he sent for the two new arrivals. Elymas could see the P45 being written and so he naturally bad-mouthed them, v8...

And then occurred one of the most dramatic confrontations in the NT. Though Paul was an unknown recent arrival with no

friends on the island, and Elymas was well established, Paul just turned on Elymas, looked him right in the eyes and told it to him straight, vv10-11... Strong language! What conviction!

Can you imagine today's Abp of Canterbury speaking like that at a meeting of a Cabinet Minister? A modern church leader would be *far* too polite and refined to single out a person like Elymas and confront him so plainly. And can you not hear all the others in the room hissing with self-righteousness: 'So *judgemental!* What a nasty little bigot! We've got a real religious nut here!' Actually, I think they would go further than merely sneering at such boorish behaviour. They would call the cops and have him arrested for 'hate-crimes', incitement and infringement of human rights.

In today's society the greatest virtue is tolerance and the most heinous crime is to be judgemental. The reason Baby P was horrifically abused and murdered was that social workers refused to be judgemental about the lifestyle of the adults supposed to be caring for him. Did you read last week about a new government leaflet *Talking to Your Teenager About Sex and Relationships*? It advises you not to convince your teenagers of 'what's right and wrong, because this may discourage them from being open.' This is the Government's brilliant response to Alfie Patten the father at 13-years of age. So there's no absolute truth, only 'my truth' and 'your truth'. Life's a value-free zone. It's all diversity, equality and a glorious tolerance for everyone. But is it?

It's diversity for everyone except Christians, it seems. There's no-one more illiberal than a liberal. The French

Revolution's motto was 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' yet it proclaimed 'no liberty for the enemies of liberty'. Our leaders might *talk* of diversity, equality and tolerance, yet they curtail our ancient free speech and even our thoughts.

Of course there's a place for genuine tolerance. Don't we tolerate our children's mistakes as they grow up? Teachers should be patient with those trying to learn, but we don't tolerate $2+2=5$. If we did, our bridges and buildings would fall down. Do we let surgeons who have failed their exams operate on us? Do we tolerate paedophiles around our children?

So why should St Paul tolerate Elymas hanging around the hugely influential proconsul, Sergius Paulus, with his false spiritual teaching? There are a lot of lies spoken about God, and much spiritual teaching comes from the devil, v10... It simply isn't true that any dream will do. Hitler had a dream of a better world. He would make the world better by getting rid of all the bad elements, the Jews, the homosexuals, the disabled. Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung also had a dream of a better world. It would be better once their enemies had been imprisoned or executed. Today's Islamists also have a dream of a better world where their enemies are destroyed. Why should we tolerate these intolerant dreams?

We were conned in the 18thC when thinkers of the Enlightenment arbitrarily made a division between *facts* and *values*. For no reason they took Christianity from the realm of truth and facts, and placed it in the realm of values, tastes, life-style. And silly church leaders agreed! Jesus never said 'I am a life-style option'. He said, 'I am the Truth'. Get

away from Jesus the Truth, and your life and society will fall apart as surely as a bridge will collapse if you don't accept the truths of mathematics. You see it happening all around you: the 'Broken Society'. It's a house built on sand.

St Paul wasn't going to have any of this right-on, non-judgemental stuff. He knew that there was truth, and there was falsehood. There was such a thing as *bad* religion, and Elymas was a practitioner of bad religion. Bad religion is spirituality that is not derived from God's Word, his truth revealed in the Bible. Paul would no more tolerate Elymas peddling his tripe to Sergius Paulus than a doctor would tolerate some quack working on a patient of his. But Paul was able to reject Elymas' dangerous nonsense, because he knew where he stood. As *Psalms* 17.7 says, 'My heart is fixed'. It's well said that if you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything! Do you know where you stand with Jesus?

Any dream will do will *not* do. Nor will any religion do. Our churches must get back their confidence in God's Word and in Jesus Christ. Then our nation will be a house built on a *rock*. It was because Paul knew exactly where he stood that he could speak with such courage and clarity. Sergius Paulus recognised that. Sadly too many of our clergy *don't* know where they stand with Jesus. No wonder the churches are emptying.

People are hungry today for God's saving truth. They are tired of spin and cynicism and uncertainty. They are longing for integrity. Once Sergius Paulus heard Paul proclaiming Jesus he knew straightaway that Elymas was a fake and became himself a believer, v12... Do you know Jesus, the real thing?