

Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. Acts 26.11.

We have seen how all the charges against Paul were trumped-up. It was just pure spite and hatred against him. But we saw last time how, before Festus, the new Roman Governor, Paul had said those words which were to seal his fate: 'I appeal to Caesar'. The rest of Acts 25 and 26 tells us how Paul was paraded before King Agrippa and his wife, the wonderfully named Bernice. Agrippa the Jew had the title of king to keep the Jewish population happy, but the real power was with the Romans, with Festus the Governor.

Anyway, Paul had to make his pitch all over again, this time to King Agrippa, and it's interesting how he claims to be a good Jew, just like King Agrippa, 26.4-8 on p1123... Like most Jews he opposed Jesus, v9... How could this upstart, a mere 'carpenter' from Nazareth have been the Messiah promised in the OT? How could these stupid Christians have kidded themselves that Jesus was the One to come? So Paul saw it as his patriotic duty as a good Jew to stamp them out, vv9-12...

And that is how he thought until one day God had other ideas. On yet another of his trips to persecute Christians, Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus whose dazzling blinded him, calling 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' This life-changing event was so important that there are three versions of it, two in Acts and one in Galatians. Imagine an Iranian Shi'ite leader with his vicious anti-apostasy laws announcing, 'I've met Jesus and I'm now a Christian'!

Paul's conversion is well known to us all. What I want us to look at today is the word 'obsession' in v11... The Greek word *emmainomenos* comes from the verb *mainomai*, to rage, to be furious - 'mania'. We're talking 'frothing at the mouth' here. Paul gives us an interesting pathology of *fanaticism*. The Jews were fanatical and irrational in their hatred and pursuit of him. But then there was a time, as he just admitted to King Agrippa, that he also frothed at the mouth against Christians. Paul had been there. He understood obsession and fanaticism.

You would have thought that in our modern age of reason and scientific rationalism fanaticism would have died out, but that is not the case. The Germany that ravaged the world in the First and Second World Wars was the most rationalistic, cultured and technologically advanced country in the world. German nationalism which culminated in the fanatical push to rid the world of all Jewish, Slavic, homosexual elements was real frothing at the mouth.

And why do Islamic jihadists want to conquer the world and force their view of life on everyone? Why do they threaten to behead people who draw unkind cartoons of Mohammed?

But please don't fall for that propaganda nonsense that it is always *religious* people who are fanatics. Who were the three greatest mass murderers of the 20thC? (Hitler, Stalin and Mao). And what did they all have in common? They were all atheists! It wasn't religious people manning the guillotines as the French Revolutionaries chopped off people's heads with gay abandon. A militant atheist who left cartoons mocking Christ in a prayer room at Liverpool's John Lennon airport is on trial

for religious harassment. (I don't believe that should be a 'crime', but the State does). But if he doesn't believe in God, fine. Why not leave us believers to it? Why froth at the mouth? I'm personally not that bothered about football, for example. I could argue that it makes too much money, and breeds bad behaviour and unruly crowds. But I won't. Live and let live. I'm not going to start some fanatical campaign to ban it.

Today, of course, is Mothering Sunday. It originated with apprentices coming home to Mother Church, but it has become an opportunity to appreciate our mothers, and to think about family life. I see fanaticism in our politicians' determination to destroy family life. New research shows that 1 in 4 mothers is single, and we live with the catastrophic consequences of absent fathers. Someone once asked how he could be a good father. He was told, 'Love your wife'.

But politicians over the decades have remorselessly undermined the fragile institution of marriage and family life by assiduously promoting the 'alternative' life-styles of cohabitation and homosexuality. Single parenthood has risen largely because of welfarism. The inconvenient truth is that if you subsidise something, you encourage it. Then there has been the determined promotion of sex-education in our schools, indoctrinating our children with a very specific ideology which is pro-abortion and pro-homosexuality, often against the express wishes of their parents.

Do not be fooled into thinking that sex-education in schools is some neutral subject. It was the express policy of Marxists to undermine capitalist countries by destroying the

strongest pillar of bourgeois society, the family unit. The first proponent of this subversion was George Lukacs in the Hungarian Communist Republic in 1919. It continues apace today.

Fanaticism is *not*, then, the preserve of religious people. Blind fanaticism which forces itself on others happens when we do not have Jesus in their lives. Fanaticism grows when people worship false gods like nationalism - we saw this with the IRA in NI - false dreams like political utopias here on earth, false gods like the idols of 'equality' and 'diversity'. When people place their own notions and their own personal dreams on the throne, then all opposition is swept aside for the glorious cause. Unspeakable things are done in the name of their false god. The end always justifies the means, however vile.

Bertrand Russell once said that no-one ever became fanatical about arithmetic. $2+2=4$. It's fact. There's nothing to dispute there, is there? But it's when people become *unsure* of themselves that they have to shout and persecute those who oppose them. The Islamic jihadists' screams are to me a sign of very great weakness and unsureness. Weak point, shout louder!

St Paul knew this. He had been there. P1124, v14, he admitted that for years he had been kicking against the pricks, but he denied the truth that kept nagging at him. He looked strong as he persecuted Christians, but he was actually unsure.

We need to get ourselves off the throne and put *God* back there. We need to turn our eyes upon Jesus and let *him* reign, not our silly ideas about how the world should be run. Once we let Jesus in, we can all calm down, and stop frothing at the mouth, because only *he* is the Way, the Truth and the Life.