

When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. 'What are you going to do?' he asked. 'This man is a Roman citizen.' Acts 22.26.

One of the proudest boasts that anyone could make in the ancient world was, *Civis Romanus sum*, 'I am a Roman citizen'. It set you above slaves, barbarians, riff-raff. To be a Roman citizen was to enjoy status and legal protection anywhere in the Roman world. And when St Paul was lifted from the baying Jewish mob by the Roman centurion for his own protection and just about to be flogged, he played the trump card he had been keeping up his sleeve. Paul knew that a Roman citizen could not be flogged without a trial. So just as the soldiers were about to start the whipping, he archly mentioned, *Civis Romanus sum*, Acts 22.25 on p1120 ... Everything changed, as Paul knew it would. He had played a blinder, vv26-27... Paul even trumped the commander who had paid a bribe for *his* citizenship, v28...

When Paul said that he was a Roman citizen, he was claiming to be part of the greatest political structure the world had ever seen, the mighty Roman Empire. The Gk word for a citizen is *polites*, which comes from *polis*, a city. We get our words 'polite', 'police', 'policy', 'politics' from this. When Aristotle said that man is a *political* animal, he merely meant that men live together in *poleis*, in cities. Human beings are herd animals; we're relational. The Latin *civis*, citizen, gives us 'civilised' and 'city'. So we're talking politics here: how people can live well together in the *polis*, the city.

It doesn't always seem so to *us*, but God's timing is always perfect. When God came to earth in Jesus, born in a stable in Bethlehem, the timing could not have been better. The

political instability which accompanied the breakdown of the Roman Republic had been resolved as Octavian became the first emperor as Augustus Caesar. When Jesus was born, the Roman world was a place of universal peace, the so-called Pax Romana. It was a time of prosperity and stability.

Why did Hong Kong become so rich? There's nothing there but rocks and water. It became rich because the British empire ensured three vital things: peace, the rule of law, and an impartial civil service. Africa is a basket case because of bad governance. The Pax Romana, the rule of law, endless miles of straight roads, made it the best time for Christ to come. It was also the best time for people like Peter and Paul to spread the word throughout the Roman world, as the key verse at Acts 1.8 says: you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Providentially Paul was a citizen of this great Roman Empire. And that's why Paul tells us to pray for all kings and those in authority. Turn to p1192, to 1 *Timothy* 2.1-7...

Recently I heard of a congregation where they wouldn't sing the National Anthem. No doubt they're all rabid republicans. They may well be right, but the fact is that at this present time, we are a monarchy, legally established, and we are commanded by St Paul to pray for the leaders we have, not the leaders we would *like* to have. When Paul prayed for the emperor, that emperor was a pagan persecuting Christians. He didn't just pray for people he happened to like and approve of.

When I was minister in NI, I led prayers for the Queen in my church. But my parish was right on the border, and I had

parishioners in the south which is a republic. If I preached in the south, I prayed for the President of the Republic. If I am in the USA I stand for the President of the Republic. They are legitimate rulers, and it is our Christian duty to pray for them, whether we personally like them or not.

Why? Because the alternative is a thousand times worse. Without leadership, or when leadership is always being undermined, we end up with chaos and anarchy. And Paul is interested in only one thing, and it is certainly not politics. What system produces the best conditions for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be spread? OK, the emperor was a pagan. OK, Paul didn't *personally* approve of him, but the political system under the emperor produced stability and peace, and *that* made it easier for Paul to move freely around the Roman world to tell people about Jesus Christ. You see, Paul was a very focussed man. All he was bothered about was Jesus Christ. How could he tell as many people as possible about Jesus, so that they could come to a saving knowledge of him as Lord? The Pax Romana made his missionary work possible and successful. So why *wouldn't* he pray for the leaders who underpinned it?

If you turn to p1218, to 1 *Peter* 2.17, you will see that St Peter also tells us to pray for our political leaders, and remember, that the 'king' he was referring to, the Roman emperor, was persecuting Christians, 2.13-17...

We should also pray for our politicians because they jolly well need it! They might not be any good, but they are the best we have, and it is well said that we get the politicians we deserve. Politicians are very sinful, but, then, so are we!

Their job is hard, and they need God's help. Politicians may not be much good, but the alternative is worse - chaos and anarchy - and the truth is that Christianity cannot flourish in chaos. We need stability for life to flourish. In 1 Cor 14.33 Paul says that God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

I mentioned earlier how *focussed* Paul was. He is not concerned with the colour of politicians. All he is bothered about is what helps him best to preach Jesus Christ to as many people as possible. Why can't we today be as focussed as this? The churches in Britain today have far more buildings, money, clergymen than Paul ever had, yet we are weak, while he was strong. Why? Because we have taken our eye off the ball. Churches are busy doing excellent work in politics, in the fields of social justice and climate change - all good work - but we are frightened to name the name of Jesus. We are frightened to present him as the only way back to God, and as the only Saviour of the world. When you are no longer confident of your product, you can't expect to make sales, can you?

Paul's sole focus was Jesus Christ. What worked for him? The Pax Romana, the stability, of the Roman empire, so pray for it! It was only because Paul was a Roman citizen that later he could famously say, 'I appeal to Caesar'. That appeal was to seal his fate. He would lose his life, but he didn't care. It got him to Rome, the very centre of this great empire, where he could proclaim Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and where he would fulfil the key verse of the Book of Acts, 1.8, the command of Jesus himself to be witnesses to him in Jerusalem, in Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.