

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia. He travelled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece.

Acts 20.1-2.

Two dull verses, you might say; link verses to get Paul from Ephesus to Greece, but I see jewels here, and the word that screams out to me is the word 'encouragement'. In just two little verses we see the idea of encouragement twice ... Paul had reason to encourage his fellow Christians. There had just been this anti-Christian riot in Ephesus where the crowd had been whipped up to shout 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' for two solid hours. Being a Christian 2000 years ago in a sea of Roman paganism, Jewish hostility, and state discrimination was not easy, especially if your family snubbed you for giving your life to Jesus. Christians needed encouragement. We still do. That's why our natural instinct is not to tell people about our faith. It's easier just to keep it to ourselves, isn't it?

But it's not just Christians in a very unchristian modern society today who need encouragement; *everyone* needs encouragement. I watched the gardeners the other day tidying up the flower beds in the town centre. I nearly walked past and left them to it, but, then I went back and told one of them how beautiful they were. He was glad that someone had taken the trouble to give a word of appreciation. It's so easy not to do, isn't it? We *think* such thoughts, but how do others know what we are thinking? You get used to your wife's good cooking. After a while you just take it all for granted. Now, if you were getting complimentary words *all* the time, you would think something was up, but a word of thanks and appreciation from

time to time goes a very long way. When people die, we all say what a great chap he was. But tell it to his face while he's still alive. Don't wait till he's dead.

One of the saddest things is to see children put down. 'Stop talking. No-one wants to listen to you'. I come across Junior Soldiers who have been told at school or even by their parents that they are useless and will never amount to anything. Some of them have gone on to win the MC. How can you enjoy life if you're always being told, 'You're too fat. You're too skinny. You're stupid'. It's tragic to see such children just wither up. You probably all know this piece of advice:

If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.
 If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.
 If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.
 If a child lives with shame, he learns to be guilty.
 If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.
 If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence.
 If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate.
 If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice.
 If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.
 If a child lives with approval, he learns to like himself.
 If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love in the world.

I want to suggest that encouragement is something of God himself. The Greek word for 'encouragement' is *paraclesis*. *Kaleo* means 'I call', and *para* (as in 'parallel') means 'beside'. And so a *paraclete* is someone you call to stand beside you. Very often it refers to a defence lawyer who will speak up for you in court. Thus he *encourages* you.

Could you turn to p 1082, to *John* 14.15-18... Jesus is about to leave his disciples through death. But he will not leave them as orphans. He prays for God the Holy Spirit to come and to stay with them for ever. Here in the NIV the Spirit is called the Counsellor. But in Greek he is called The Paraclete, the *Encourager*. Of course, not all encouragement is good. In bad company there will those who will encourage you to get up

to badness. But notice here in v17 that the Paraclete is called also the Spirit of *Truth*. And the Truth is not some philosophy, but a person called Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to make Jesus the Truth real to us. Amidst all the lies and spin and delusion today, it is hugely encouraging to know that Jesus the Truth will always win through. So to reject Jesus is to reject reality.

Truth/Jesus will always prevail, so relax.

When you encourage another person, then, you are sharing in the work of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, whose job it is to *paraclete* us, to encourage us. Paul encouraged the others. God the Holy Spirit is always encouraging us even in bad times.

Let's go back to *Acts* 20 on p1116. Those first six verses look pretty dull, don't they? 'They did this, and went there, and said that'. And then there's a list of unpronounceable names - Sopater, Pyrrhus, Aristarchus, Gaius &c &c. Strangely, I find this the most encouraging aspect of this passage.

Take down a copy of the Koran, and you will find nothing whatever like this. It took me a long time to realise why I was finding it hard-going. Suddenly it struck me: there's no story! And very few people. It's just Allah warning people to do this, and not to do that all the time. The few people that there are have been lifted from the OT - Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David - and any narratives are versions of OT stories. It's as though Allah is so transcendent, that he is far removed from the nitty gritty of daily life and individual lives. Nothing happens.

But read the Bible, OT and NT, and there's a clear story line from God's promise to Abraham that through him all the

peoples of the earth will be blessed, right up to Jesus who becomes God's saving blessing to the whole world. There are lots of ups and downs in the story, usually because of man's sin, but even a child can follow the narrative. This is a God who is *Immanuel*, God-with-us, involved in daily earthly life. Indeed, He becomes a human being in Jesus to live our daily life. And this Immanuel God works through ordinary people. The Bible is littered with people, long, long lists of names.

So what does this tell me, and how does it *encourage* me in my daily living? It tells me that God knows my name also. I'm not just a number. I count to him, and he knows me, and all about me. It also tells me that God is involved in my life.

May I ride my hobby-horse again? The famous architect Mies van der Rohe did *not* say, 'The Devil is in the details'. All that means is, 'Read the small print'. What he *actually* said was 'God is in the details'. God is managing this universe at the macro-level, but he's also *micro*-managing it. He's involved in the details of your personal life, working to save you.

Laura and I have been to hell and back these past eight months, and it's not over yet. But when I read my Bible I am encouraged. I am encouraged to know that God knows our names, he knows what we are going through, and he is in the details. There's a narrative here, a story that we don't understand yet. But Jesus is God-with-us and God-for-us, God-on-our-side.

And one last piece of encouragement. From v7 you will see how Paul's preaching was so dull that poor Eutychus fell asleep and out of the window. Well, if that can happen even to the great St Paul, there's hope for me. I find that encouraging.