

Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. Acts 26.28.

As we work our way through *Acts*, we come now to one of the most dramatic episodes in the farce of Paul's trial which began with the false and malicious accusations of the Jews and ended with Paul in Rome after he had appealed to Caesar himself. Here he is now before the new Roman governor Festus. As a Roman administrator Festus is completely out of his depth. All this Jewish religious stuff means nothing to him. Why not get King Herod Agrippa, a Jew, to help him out? So here in *Acts* 25 and 26 we see Paul making his defence before Festus, the Roman governor, and Agrippa, the Jewish King. Of course, the real power in the land is Festus. The Romans only made Agrippa the Jew the nominal king to keep the Jewish population quiet.

So picture the scene. There's Festus bemused by all these Jews squabbling over goodness-knows-what. And here is King Agrippa, all resplendent in his Ruritanian costume from the dressing-up box, together with his sister Bernice, 25.23...

Standing before all this majesty is the figure of Paul. He is told, 'Speak!' He begins his defence and tells how he used to be a Pharisee, a strict Jew who had no time at all for this upstart Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah and his ridiculous and deluded followers. He persecuted them mercilessly until, one day, on the road to Damascus, he got the shock of his life when he actually met the very risen Christ whom he was opposing, p1123, *Acts* 26.11-15... Paul's life would never be the same again. Everything had been turned upside down, and all because, to his astonishment, he had met the risen Lord Jesus.

Now instead of persecuting Christians, he was a Christian. He was obedient to the vision of the risen Christ. He had seen him with his very own eyes. How could he deny the evidence of his own eyes? He had to be true to it. So now he must tell everyone about the risen Lord Jesus. And that's what the Jews didn't like. That's why he was on trial, 24.21...

At this stage Paul was really getting fired up. Festus hadn't a clue what he was talking about and just thought he was plain bonkers, 26.24... But Paul knew that King Agrippa, a good Jew, knew what he was talking about, v26...The idea of the dead rising was familiar to Jews. The OT led them to have an expectation of it 26.22f. Agrippa knew this perfectly well, and Paul knew that Agrippa knew it. So now he really eyeballed the King, v27... It was as though he was saying to Agrippa, 'You do believe what I am saying is true, don't you, don't you?'

It was at this stage that Agrippa made his famous reply, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian'. That's the AV but the Greek is notoriously difficult to translate. Just look at how the NIV translates it, v28... I think what Agrippa is saying is, 'Hold on there, Paul. Don't get carried away. You're putting words into my mouth'.

Have you ever argued with a person who agrees with everything you say, but who then ignores what you have just said? The Scots say, 'I hear you'. They might hear you, and even agree with you but they don't accept what you say. *A man persuaded against his will/is of the same opinion still!* 'Persuaded against his will'. Agrippa probably *did* agree with Paul, but he wouldn't change his mind - and this is the crucial

bit - *because he didn't want to change his mind!*

King Agrippa wasn't actually a bad chap. He and his sister tried enormously hard to avert the bloody war which followed the Jewish revolt against Roman rule in the year 66. In v30 we read that Agrippa got up and walked out when Paul fingered him... But he knew that Paul had done nothing wrong, v31...

But Paul and Agrippa make a strange contrast. Agrippa didn't want to accept the truth of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, because he didn't want to. He was in denial. But Paul did, when he met him on the Damascus Road. And Paul had just as much to lose as Agrippa did. Paul was a highly respected Pharisee who had made his name opposing Jesus and the Christians. Now by *accepting* Jesus, he lost *everything* - his reputation, his friends, and no doubt members of his family. Paul followed where the evidence led; Agrippa believed what suited him.

So what I am talking about today, then, is Integrity, something, I am afraid, that is in very short supply today, and something, I believe, that our country is really crying out for. Follow wherever the evidence leads you, even if it means mid-life telling everyone, 'So far in my life, I've been wrong'. Integrity is not just being honest, it is being honest *with yourself*. When Paul met Jesus on the Damascus Road, he realised he had been on the wrong track all these years. Yes, he would look silly to his friends. Yes, he would be laughed at, but better to follow the truth than to be popular. 26.19, Paul had to be true to the evidence of his eyes, however that shook his cosy life up. Agrippa didn't want to be bothered.

I believe that we are at a cross-roads in our national

life at this election time. The people don't want spin. We want the truth. We are disgusted at MPs with their noses in the trough and who then get Legal Aid to help them prove that they can be judged not by a normal court but by their fellow MPs. We have a massive debt which no-one mentions. Instead we get sweeteners from all sides. The country is crying out, 'Please, just tell us the truth'. Let's have a bit of integrity here.

And it's not just politicians. Even our church leaders use their considerable national platforms to talk about every issue under the sun except the one that really counts. When was the last time you heard a national church leader talk to the nation about Jesus as Saviour and Lord? Stand up and tell the truth.

It's all summed up in this little word 'Integrity'. Say what you mean, and mean what you say. I try to imagine that meeting between Paul and Agrippa. Paul was in the dock, the underdog. Agrippa was high on his throne, majestic in his robes. But who do we remember today? Of course, it is Paul. Agrippa is only a footnote to history now. We remember Paul, because *he* was the one with integrity. He followed the truth.

I know lots of people who aren't against church; who agree with Jesus; who would come to church occasionally and sometimes put a tenner on the plate. But they are like Agrippa. They put their hands over their ears and won't follow the evidence. The truth of Jesus is too inconvenient. So like Agrippa, they won't make the commitment. 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian' - *almost!* But they should remember Christ's warning: Whoever is ashamed of me...in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. (*Mark 8.38*).