

As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.' Acts 24.25.

All St Paul had wanted to do was to bring relief money collected from the Asian churches to Jerusalem to help the poor, and he found himself set upon by the Jewish mob and hauled before the Roman governor on trumped-up charges of desecrating the Jerusalem Temple. It was a bizarre situation, and you have to wonder why Christians then and today inspire such hatred and hostility. What harm are we doing? What harm was Paul doing as he brought the collection for the poor? What harm did *Jesus* do that they had to murder him? Very strange!

Paul now stood before the highest authority in the land, the Governor Felix. It was quite a spectacle. Even his wife Drusilla turned up for the day's entertainment. V22 tells us that Felix rather surprisingly knew quite a lot about this new Christianity thing, which is here called 'The Way' ... (The Greek word is 'rather accurately'). Let me repeat the important point that all these people actually existed. We know about Felix from Josephus, Suetonius, and Tacitus who said 'he ruled like a king with the mind of a slave.' We also know about Drusilla who was the daughter of King Herod Agrippa I. We know from Josephus that she was married to the king of Emesa (modern Homs). When she was only 16, our friend Felix persuaded her to leave the king to become his third wife. They then had a son, Agrippa, who was killed in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD79.

Now let's read Acts 24.24-25 again in the light of the knowledge of Felix's highly irregular marriage to Drusilla, and

you can see why they squirm at Paul's preaching... Felix was clearly fascinated by the 'theory' of Christianity. What he hadn't bargained for was its moral demands on individual lives as a whole way of life, 'The Way'. He thought religion was just mechanical ritual in a temple and philosophical musings, not a demand for daily righteousness and self-control. When Felix heard about divine *judgement*, he was afraid. That's when he abruptly ended the hearing: 'that's enough for now', v25b...

It always fascinates me why some people aren't Christians. Is it that they *can't* believe, or that they *won't* believe? It was and is a huge sadness to me that my father died last October without coming to Christ. The reasons for unbelief are complex. Some have never been taught. Today's modern schools have much to answer for here. When I teach Junior Soldiers learning about Christ for the first time, I don't find closed doors. Other people are still seeking; we pray that Jesus finds them as he found Saul on the road to Damascus. Others are doing so well out of life, they see no point. Some, I'm afraid, seem possessed of the devil. The reasons for unbelief are complex.

But scripture here gives us an insight in the case of Felix the Roman governor. He was quite open to Paul and found him fascinating, *until* he got to his personal life which was on the dodgy side. But more than that, Felix saw his personal life as his *own* affair, not some God-botherer's. If this Christianity-lark meant changing his life-style, he didn't want to know. Evangelism assumes that people don't accept Christ because they don't *understand* it. My experience is now leading me to the conclusion that people understand well enough. They

don't accept Christ, because they don't want him interfering in their lives and telling them what to do. It's comes back to this basic 'Jesus is Lord' thing, and they reject that.

Many people don't like John Humphrys, the Rottweiler interviewer on Radio 4' *Today* programme. I quite like him. I admire his intelligence and his courage. His life is fascinating. Brought up in a Christian home where church was central, he has lost his old certainties, yet still can't let go. Hence the title of his latest book, *In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist*. He wants someone to convince him of the reality of God. What torments him is how to square a good and powerful God with all the suffering in the world. It's a fair point which we all have to come to terms with.

In October, 1966, when only a 23 year old cub reporter, he was sent to cover the shocking story of Aberfan, when a massive slag heap fell on to a primary school killing 116 children and 28 adults. How could a good God have allowed that? For obvious reasons Humphrys has been haunted by Aberfan ever since.

But somehow that doesn't stack up to me. I look at my own life. I have seen people slaughtered in NI, and had to deal with their relatives. I have lost my only son in tragic circumstances, and yet I accept Jesus Christ. Perhaps it's because I'm so thick and gullible. Actually, when I look at John Humphrys' personal life, he has actually done very well out of life, thank-you-very-much. I watch Stephen Fry, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins on TV *frothing* at the mouth over the evilness of God, but, you know, God has actually been very kind to each of them in their personal lives.

And then in September, 2009 I read something which opened my eyes. It was reported that John Humphrys had left Val Sanderson, the mother of his 9 year old son, for his new partner, Catherine Bennett. 'So *that's* it,' I realised. 'You like the idea of religion, but you won't allow it to make any demands on your personal life. You want religion to make you feel good, but you don't want any commitment'.

And that's exactly how Felix, the Roman Governor thought. It wasn't that he *couldn't* believe, but that he *wouldn't* believe. People have this wrong notion that the word 'Islam' means 'peace' because it has the letters s-l-m in it. It does not mean peace; it means 'submission'. And that is a very deep insight. It is about submitting to God and *his* will.

The earliest Christian creed was just 'Jesus is Lord'. That's why Christians were thrown to the lions: they wouldn't accept that Caesar, the State, was Lord. Only Jesus was Lord. 'Jesus is Lord' *also* means that *I* am not Lord. It is *not* my life, and I'll do whatever I like. That's what John Humphrys won't accept, nor Felix, nor all these other TV celebs who erupt at the idea of God telling them what to do. They are angry because they absolutely refuse to submit to Christ. They refuse to give up their autonomy. Didn't Gordon Brown quote WE Henley, 'I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul'?

So why do *I* submit and let Christ reign in me? Because I don't trust myself. I would rather have the King of Love running my life. I see the chaos caused by this exaltation of selfishness. When Jesus reigns; when he is fully Lord of all, this world will be truly happy, fair and at perfect peace.