

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting ... I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' Acts 26.15-18.

And so Paul continues his defence of himself before King Agrippa from the ridiculous and spiteful accusations of the Jews as he explains how he was converted when he met the living Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. Here Paul records what Jesus said to him when he stopped him in his tracks, vv15-18...

It was a life-changing event for Paul. Instead of *persecuting* the followers of Christ, he now felt *commissioned* by Christ to open the eyes of his fellow Jews and Gentiles, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Strong stuff! We don't hear preachers today trying to turn our people from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, do we? Have we 'moved on' from such language?

Today is traditionally called *Passion* Sunday. In our preparation for Easter we take this Sunday to reflect on Christ's *passion*, his *sufferings*, as he was bound, whipped, and mocked by the soldiers who then drove nails through his hands and feet on the Cross. Last year I went to see an extraordinary exhibition in the National Gallery called *The Sacred Made Real*. It was of 16th and 17thC Spanish polychrome sculptures of Christ in physical agony. These sculptures were carried through the streets in Holy Week and are still in the churches where they are objects of intense devotion. It is all very strange to us in Protestant Britain where our worship tends to be very wordy and cerebral, but the religion of Catholic Spain was very

physical. Worship engaged your touch, your smell, and sight. It wasn't all in the head, as with us. We might *talk* about Jesus's sufferings in a sermon, but they would make a statue of him, not as an idol, but to shew people how vile his agony really was. I was stunned by how incredibly realistic these polychrome figures were. One figure by Gregorio Fernandez portrays Jesus just scourged and then presented to the people by Pontius Pilate with the famous words 'Ecce Homo'. The flesh wounds on Christ's back and the bruised and blemished skin are so real that people at the exhibition were genuinely shocked. When the fabric loincloth was removed for restoration in 1989 it revealed that the genitalia were carved and Fernandez had initially conceived his figure as totally naked. All paintings of Christ on the Cross shew him with a loincloth, don't they? In actual fact he would have been stark naked. The Romans wanted to humiliate criminals and warn bystanders.

Another statue by Pedro de Mena brilliantly captures Jesus so weak that his eyes are out of focus, ready to collapse. These strange Spanish statues are not gore for the sake of it, but to hit home to us that Christ's sufferings were real, and that this is what he underwent for us. We should never let familiarity with the Easter story dull us to what actually happened, nor imagine that our salvation was easily bought.

But the question which will not leave me is, 'But how could we have *done* this to him?' As the hymn says, 'Why? what hath my Lord done?' Here was Jesus, the purest man who ever lived, the kindest and most gentle. Why did they have to kill him? And why so utterly viciously, as the statues remind us?

The people who wanted Jesus dead were not bad people. Caiaphas and Annas, the high priests were good men. Pontius Pilate was just trying to keep peace in a troublesome province. These were not psychos and criminals. But one of the most deadly verses in the Bible is at *John 18.14* where Caiaphas the high priest justifies what he plans to do to Jesus with the words, 'It is expedient that one man should die for the people'. *Expedient!* Caiaphas had actually persuaded himself that he was doing a *good* thing, something to *help* the people!

That's how the IRA squared *their* consciences also. Another family without a daddy? Just collateral damage, but necessary for the glorious cause of the United Ireland. *Expedient!* That's how the Basque terrorists argue also. *And* the Islamic jihadists, except *they* see it as more than mere *expedience*; it's actually the will of Allah himself.

Remember the priest and the levite who walked by on the other side? They weren't *bad* people. They were *busy* people who didn't have time to help the man beaten up at the roadside. It was *expedient* that they should hurry on. Someone else would come later. We'll leave it to them.

The driver on his mobile who was in such a hurry who nearly kills someone on the road can always square it in his mind. He's an important person on important business. It's *expedient* that he has to drive so aggressively.

It isn't just that we behave so badly, but that we *justify* our bad behaviour. It wasn't just that they treated the best man who ever lived so appallingly, but that they thought they were doing the right thing. 'It is *expedient* that one man

should die for the people'. Even Paul thought he was doing right when he kept persecuting Christians. Acts 26.9 on p1123: 'I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.'

It happened then. It happens today. So what's going on? I think Paul shews us here, when he tells King Agrippa how the living Lord Jesus met him on the Damascus Road and told him that the people were in darkness and in the power of Satan. As I said earlier, that's old-fashioned talk these days, but old-fashioned doesn't mean 'wrong'. I am very reluctant to dismiss the insights of Jesus himself in favour of some modish fad or trendy thinker. In fact, what Jesus says here is the only explanation which I find convincing. We are in darkness and in the power of Satan. Why else would decent people like Caiaphas and Annas treat Jesus in that inhumane way?

Jesus himself spoke of the 'Prince of this world'. The devil really laughs when people stop believing in him. Even Jesus believed in the devil. Turn to p1228, 1 John 5.19: 'the whole world is under the control of the evil one'... That is why the world is the way it is. That is why good men did unspeakable things to Jesus. But look at 1 Jn 3.8 on p1226: 'the Son of God came to destroy the devil's work'.

And that's why Jesus told Paul to open the eyes of the people, Jews and Gentiles, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. The reality which few preachers will say today is that this good world of God's is presently sold under sin. Jesus came to release us from Satan's grip by which he was killed, but by which we are also forgiven.