

'I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.' Acts 20.21

How can we be sure that the Bible is true and not made up? Last week we saw an example of a event that would hardly have been made up - Paul preaching so hard he literally bored a man to death! If you were making up the NT, would you really shew leading lights like Peter and Paul in such a bad light? Why invent stories about Paul boring people to death and Peter as a coward denying the Lord Jesus to a slip of a girl? The fact that the NT includes these episodes points to its truthfulness.

Having raised poor Eutychus from the dead after falling asleep in the apostle's sermon, Paul left Troas and headed for Jerusalem. On the way he stopped at Miletus on the SW coast of modern Turkey. He called the elders of nearby Ephesus to make an important speech to them, for he knew he would never see them again, 20.36, on p1117...

Have you ever wondered why we in the URC don't have bishops? This farewell speech of Paul to the Ephesian elders tells you why. 'Elder' in Gk is 'presbuteros', presbyter. 'Bishop' comes from another Gk word, 'episkopos' which means 'overseer'. Look now at v17 ... 'elders', but if you look over at v28 you will see Paul calls them 'overseers', or as the footnote says 'bishops'. So the Bible tells us that elder and bishop are one and the same. They're interchangeable. Bishop is not a promotion from being an elder. Elders have oversight.

But let's get to the meat now of Paul's last words to the Ephesian presbyters/bishops. He clearly wants to put the record straight with them, vv17-20... v26... and vv33-35... One of the

things he wants to make absolutely clear is that he has been a faithful preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is something that worries me also. When I face Almighty God on the Day of Judgement will I be condemned for telling lies about God, and not being true to God's Word in holy scripture? Paul says he has preached the whole counsel of God on his travels, not just the nice bits, v27... And here in v21 he summarises the essence of his preaching to Jews and to Gentiles, v21...

In just 11 Gk words (14 in English) he says it consists of four things: God, Jesus, repentance, faith, v21... Masterly, isn't it? Genius is always simple. $E=mc^2$. My general rule is that if a person is confusing in the pulpit, he is probably confused. People are usually ineffectual because they are not focussed. They don't really know why they are there. Paul knew exactly what he was doing, and had got to the heart of the matter: God, Jesus, repentance, faith. Brilliant, isn't it?

So much of today's preaching is tedious, because you ask yourself, 'What is that man on about? What is he saying?' There's no focus. And society hasn't a clue what the Church is saying because all it hears from our leaders is a lot of waffle about ... well, about what? But people listened to *Paul*. Many of them may not have liked what he was saying, but they knew what it was he was saying: God, Jesus, repentance, faith.

Go through any letter of St Paul, and see how often he names Jesus. When we recently attended the institution of a local Vicar, the bishop never mentioned Jesus once in his address, not once! Why are we Christians so scared to mention the Saviour's Name, and to exalt him? We know God only through

Jesus Christ. Many won't like us saying this, but if that's what we believe, and as 'Christians' we are named after 'Christ', then say it. People will always respect integrity. No-one needs to be arrogant; just speak the truth in love.

But what about this word 'repentance'? How often today do we hear the call from preachers for repentance? Why do our national church leaders bang on about all the trendy causes of the day, but are too scared to call the nation to repentance? Many will hate them for it, but at least they will get respect. Go back to p1094, to Acts 2.38ff. Peter called the people to repentance from their sinful ways. Look at the result in v41 - not hostility but 3000 new church members in a day!

Repentance is not just saying sorry. To repent is to 'repoint' your life; it is a complete change in your life, as your priorities and values change, as you put Christ at the centre instead of self. We are a greedy, selfish, childish society at the present time. From the highest levels to the lowest we deal with lies and spin and half-truths. We have generally turned our backs on God, and I can't see that it has done us any good. No-one is happier as a result. In fact the drugs, drink, gambling, porno epidemics point to a very sick and disordered society. We need to call our nation to repentance, and to put their faith in Jesus Christ, not in money, the syringe, or the bottle. Why aren't we? Who knows, people might actually thank us? I read this the other day:

In 1956 a young lady came to stay with our family, and we grew close. She said to me, 'Our relationship can go no further because you are not a Christian'. I am eternally grateful to her for that. I was converted, engaged, married, and ordained in that order, and this summer we celebrate 50 very happy years together.

That Christian woman way back in 1956 had the courage of her convictions. Do we? Is that why no-one's listening to us? As a Church we need to regain our confidence in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is *power*, the power of God unto salvation.

The truth is we human beings need each other, and we need God. Rejecting these things is not an option. Only last week I read how marriage, for example, could be the secret of surviving cancer. The stress of separation may harm a patient's immune system. Statistics from the Indiana University School of Medicine shew that those who are separated have the worst chance of survival. We generally thrive better with others.

I give a lecture to the Junior Soldiers on 'Relationships'. Girly, they think. But I put it to them: 'You're in Afghanistan and you get a letter saying your girlfriend's just gone off with your best mate. You're not now going to be an effective soldier?' Relationships are vital.

And so is our relationship with God. The Bible isn't a rule book. It's a massive love-letter where God keeps wooing us back from false-lovers who promise everything and can't deliver. On p1036 God keeps calling to us, but we ignore him, *Luke 7.31-32*... God wants us back. We thrive better with him.

And that is what repentance is; it's coming back to God, returning to him. Our nation needs to hear this, and we should be confident in the gospel's saving power. So open your hearts to God. Come to know the Lord Jesus as *your* Lord. Make a space for him in your life, as you make time to read his words in the Bible, and to speak to him in prayer. What we all need is in those four simple words: God, Jesus, repentance, faith.