

'Unhinderedly'

What a week.

What a mess.

I wonder what the Queen has been thinking about her Kingdom, her realm, while on holiday at Balmoral, as she was dragged into the political mess at Westminster 11 days ago.

And what a political mess – are you thinking, NO mike – don't stray into the area of Brexit, we come to church to get away from all that nonsense.

Don't worry, I am not going to sermonise about a particular view on the European Community and the United Kingdom's relationship with it, for that way lies potential reputational ruin for a minister, but there is also a danger that by not saying anything, that the particular Christian voice is lost to the political world.

A blog I read yesterday by Ian Paul (which I will post to our Facebook page later today) notes that there is both a Christian case to remain and also one to leave – which kind of sounds like sitting on the fence to me.

But then the question of leave or remain is too simplistic and humanity at heart is far from simplistic. The article also says that “there isn’t actually a ‘magical’ Christian answer to the question [of Brexit]. That if we are heed to Scripture, we would see that the “EU is not the greatest human dream realised, but neither is the EU the end-times beastly conspiracy for world government from which we must come out”. More fence sitting maybe.

So, what about church and our society – what can we contribute to the debate?

We need to consider the historical question of the growth of church and its’ influence on the secular world. Christians have had to live and survive in all kinds of political contexts through history, and still do so today (think of Christians in Chine, North Korea, Pakistan, as well as the secularized West). There is a belief among some that that politics is over-ridingly important, because simply it has such a profound impact on our lives.

The form of government in the country in which we live, the leaders that are involved in decision making of course impact on our economic and social wellbeing, but they do not define truth, and nor does any of the debate around Brexit in any way come close to truth.

But I say, the Christian faith is distinctively committed to truth – truth found in the one Lord Jesus Christ for whom we are called to faithfully witness.

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So what of today's reading? What do we learn from Paul in the book of Acts as it comes to its conclusion, or should I say ending – as there isn't really a conclusion?

After three months in Malta, Paul sets sail on a ship bound for Rome with a fair south wind bringing him and his guards to Puteoli. News of his arrival has reached the shores before Paul, and he's welcomed first by fellow Christians in the port town, and then at the Forum of Appius some 42 miles from Rome and then even more folk join them 10 miles later on at the Three Taverns.

What great encouragement to Paul this fellowship must have been after the trials of his journey. These Christians were a real blessing to one another – are we to one another?

When people struggle – are we there?

When they have doubts – do we come alongside and listen?

When we struggle ourselves – do we open up, make ourselves vulnerable and available for our sisters and brothers to support us? To give help, we must also be ready to receive help and support ourselves – trusted support, from those who seek and know the wisdom of God – perhaps our politicians could take note.

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So, Paul arrives in Rome, and sets to calling the local Jewish diaspora together – quickly dispelling any notion that he has done anything against the Jewish faith, and that he was here, in the heart of the Roman Empire to appeal to Caesar. In fact, Paul wants to talk to them, to see them in order that they can see he is bound because of his hope for the nation of Israel.

The hope for Israel is the same hope we have today – the hope of the Messiah. It's a hope found in the truth of the Gospel.

Yet, word seems not to have reached the local Jewish population – the leaders in Judea who tried to have Paul charged have not sent letters ahead saying – troublemaker coming your way, avoid him and make his life misery. Yet, they have heard of this sect as they call it – the local Christians in Rome are known but not yet causing any problems or issues.

I wonder if that is how we are seen today by many – are we now a small sect. Little known about who we are, who we follow – what Jesus has done. I think maybe this is so as generation upon generation coming through school lack any biblical literacy... what an indictment on the church today.

Have we been lacking in effective witness over the generations?

This is what Paul does – it says he 'witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God'.

This audience was the Jewish folk of Rome, so he references the Law and Moses – pointing the way to Jesus – and some are convinced and others not, but those refusing to believe doesn't stop Paul – he is compelled, just as we have heard all the way through Acts, he is compelled to share the Good News of Christ.

He quotes from Isaiah

*You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”*

What truth is found in these words – what truth this speak to the generation today as those of power grapple in the many lies of politics, both high and low.

Just look at any political debate and it is about getting the message over, not about listening, never mind understanding the point of view of the other side. And as for all we see around us – we have never had so much of a birds-eye view of world events, from hurricane Dorian to the war in Syria, from the fires of the Amazon to the melting ice caps

of the Arctic – yet so many do not perceive the destruction we
wreak on our planet and our people.

Paul is saying – TURN! Turn to God.

Allow your eyes to see and your ears to hear – using your
hearts to understand that healing – of our fallen natures and
of our fallen world – lie with God.

This isn't some facile comment – saying that if we all believe
in God, in the Trinitarian God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit
everything would be ok, because that ignores the fact of the
fallen nature of humanity.

But it would be start – LOVE is God, and if we know God, and
know His love for us, then how can we harm one another
and the world in which we live?

And the amazing thing – this news is for all people – no
matter race or colour; social or economic standing; age or
gender – God is the God of all people, though not all people
are for God... and therein lies the conundrum of our failing
world.

It's a battle – a spiritual battle and one that at the moment in the Western world, the church, the bride of Christ appears to be losing.

We are trying in many ways to appease the world rather than stand out and be different, to stand up for God, not that He needs us to do that to achieve His purpose, but it would be nice.

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And how did we get here?

Paul's mission to the Gentiles – the message of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah wasn't just for Israel – it was for all.

²⁸ "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

God's plan had been achieved to this point – the Gospel message had reached the centre of Empire. It has started to form Christian communities in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Colossae and places in between and now Rome, where in 315AD coins were minted under Emperor Constantine with the sign of Christ, the Chi-

Rho monogram, – and then with the Council of Nicaea in 325, Christianity was stamped as the official faith with agreed doctrine throughout the Empire.

How though – how had this small seed of faith, of trust in the Lord Jesus got to this point?

That answer is found in the book of Acts which we have just come to the end of... but it is not the end.

³⁰For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

These are the last words – but they leave a question. What next? What happened to Paul? How did his trial go? Did he get released? Did he get to Spain in the end? If he was released – when was he re-arrested?

These questions have answers, or theories that are answers – but for me they are not the point of this ending of Acts. This open ending doesn't make me want to search out the questions of the history of Paul, but the open ending rather

leads me to see Acts not as a journey's end - but rather a beginning.

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Think for a minute what our understanding of God and of the Christian faith would look like without the book of Acts.

Remove it from the canon of the Bible and we would finish at

John 21:25

²⁵Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

... and then pick up at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans

1 *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— ²the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures*

How would we understand the other epistles without Acts – the epistles to the Colossians, Philippians, Corinthians, Thessalonians, Galatians and Ephesians? We wouldn't

Acts gives us the journey – the movement of the Gospel as proclaimed by Jesus in Matthew's gospel –

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Acts shows the fulfilment of God's plan – to bring Jesus to the wider world, so why did Luke end it as he did.

Because I believe it set the next stage of the journey.

The end of Acts, the last sentence is not journey's end, but only the beginning. If we long for a more complete ending, then we miss sight of the deep significance it:

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Let's pick out some key words

- Proclaimed ...

Proclamation is to publicly or officially announce matters of great importance. What could be more important than the Good News of Christ, and what could be more necessary than making it known.

- Kingdom ...

Is a realm associated with or regarded as being under the control of a particular person or thing

- And so, the Kingdom of God ...

Is the whole earth – His realm, under His control.

Other words in the last sentence are:

- Taught ...

Is the past tense of teach, which is to impart knowledge or instruction

- Lord Jesus Christ ...

Brings together some of the titles of Jesus. Jesus, or Jeshua is the new Joshua – the deliverer who brings the promise of a new land, a new Kingdom on earth. As Lord he is God. LORD is the English translation of YHWH, the unpronounceable name of God - *Adonai*, or in the Greek Septuagint translation, *kyrios*.

That Jesus is Lord, is God, is I AM - is all wrapped up in the word Lord, but also is the notion that as Lord, he is over our lives – is Lord of those who follow him.

As Christ, Jesus does not have a surname but another title – which can only be understood in light of the Old Testament. The Greek *Christos* translates the Hebrew term *mashiah*, or the anglicised form Messiah, with

the root meaning of 'the one who has been anointed'. Jesus – appointed by God for Kingship – the fulfilment of Jewish expectations of the Messiah and the understanding of the continuity between Judaism and Christianity.

Lord Jesus Christ is layered with deep theological meaning – relevant for all today...

and then we have the words

- Boldness and without hindrance ...

To be bold is to be willing to take a risk, to be confident and courageous, and without hindrance is to be without things that cause resistance, delay or obstruction.

Paul spent two years openly and publicly imparting knowledge about Jesus – who is God and the Messiah, that the realm of God, over the earth is found in this Jesus, and he managed it, despite being under house arrest without delay or obstruction. More so, he was willing to risk all to do undertake the spread of the Gospel.

What an ending to the book – what a set up for the future.

What a call to us today - as followers of the same Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts is a rollercoaster from the Ascension of Jesus, to Paul in chains in Rome... a journey that is yet to be finished...

And we are companions on that road (more of which next week).

From chapter 13 onwards with the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey is it a story, a journey of faith, of trust, of justification. It is Paul's journey from no faith in Christ, to conversion and deep faith and justification, and then onto witness for Christ and persecution for that witness.

What does that mean for us in the face of political unrest, in the midst of world events and issues.

It doesn't mean we disengage for the world troubles and say – God's got it, and just carry on. We engage because we are God's people in the world. We are disciples of Jesus and missionaries to the world outside our door.

But we must also ensure our engagement with the world, in all its spheres - political, business, social and across all boundaries, is informed by our faith in Christ.

Jim Memory – a lecturer at Redcliffe College says

We are constantly being told that the EU referendum is the defining political issue of our generation, and potentially a turning point in our history as a nation. That might or might not be true, but whatever our political perspective, as Christians we believe that Jesus Christ, not politics, is the hope of the nations. The earliest Christian confession, 'Jesus is Lord', wasn't so much a statement of faith, but a defiant rejection of Caesar. For Christians, Jesus Christ, not secular political power, is our ultimate authority. He is Lord, and his sovereignty should be the controlling paradigm for reflecting on life, the universe and everything, even the referendum.

I would add, we ask God in the Lord's prayer this – Your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth as in heaven.

When we say those words, do we really mean them?

Your will God.

Your will on our earth – yes Lord, make it more like you want it. Make it more heavenly, more loving, forgiving and not accepting of the wicked ways that separate us from you.

Do we declare that, or do we just wade in with our own opinion with a few taps on our phone or keyboard as we reply to some comment on social media thread, or start one our self?

Let's think Kingdom. Think Jesus.

The adage – 'what would Jesus do' is more applicable than ever I believe.

Warren Wiersbe concludes his commentary on Acts with these words

'Luke did not write his book simply to record ancient history. He wrote to encourage the church in every age to be faithful to the Lord and carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. "What was begun with so much heroism ought to be continued with ardent zeal," said Charles Spurgeon, "since we are assured that the same Lord is mighty still to carry on His heavenly designs."

God promised Paul safe arrival in Rome.

The same God promises His eternal life to all who follow Jesus.

He also asks that we share that Good News

'Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age' said Jesus.

Pray – God – your Kingdom come

Then go – be daring, be bold and unhindered.

Share the Gospel of Christ in our broken world.

Amen