

## **404 Not mad, most noble Festus**

Last week we reflected on the Holy Spirit's instruction to the Church at Antioch, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul". This word was duly tested with fasting and prayer, then confirmed and accepted by faith, and acted upon (Acts 13.1-3). Off went Barnabas and Saul, and later, Paul and Silas, to fulfil their divine commission. Under the Lord they took responsibility themselves for their routes and methods day by day, while being alert for the Holy Spirit's occasional, specific instructions (eg., Acts 16.6-12).

Just so with us today: we serve Almighty God our heavenly Father through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ; we live under His authority and within His overall programme; we take responsibility for our own decisions; and we stay alert for specific interventions by the Holy Spirit.

On three great Gospel-proclaiming tours (1: Acts 13.4 – 14.28 / 2: 15.40 – 18.22 / 3: 18.23 – 21.17) Paul and his companions had numerous highs of progress and lows of hostility, often with great danger (eg., II Corinthians 1.8-11; 4.8-10; 6.4-10; 7.5; 11.23b-33). Not surprisingly at times Paul was fearful and ground down, with the Lord stepping in to encourage him, while Paul kept doggedly on with his calling (eg., Acts 18.5-11; 23.11; 9.15-16). What an example he sets us for today.

After several warnings that there would be trouble ahead, Paul reached Jerusalem (Acts 20.22-24; 21.10-15), and sure enough, the Jews set to work to get rid of him by fair means or foul (Acts 23.12-15; 25.2-3). There followed some very frustrating years for Paul (eg., Acts 24.27), while Felix and then Festus, two Roman Governors based in Caesarea, messed him around as a political pawn in their desire to keep in with the Jews.

But finally the day came when Paul could speak freely of Christ before Festus, King Herod Agrippa II and his wife (and sister ...) Bernice, which he duly did with his usual force and clarity (Acts 26.1-23). Festus had heard enough! – shouting out that Paul had gone mad (v.24).

And then came that wonderful reply from Paul, standing as he was before these three powerful, worldly people: "I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness" (v.25). He then pointed out that for King Agrippa, "none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner" (v.26), "this thing" referring of course to the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus

Christ in Jerusalem. In reply to Paul's question, Agrippa replied that he was "almost" persuaded to be a Christian – a classic reply of both then and now, spoken by one who recognises the truth when presented with it, but who refuses, at least at the time, to commit to it. When they were alone, Paul's three significant listeners agreed that he had done nothing wrong and could have been released were it not for his appeal to Caesar (vv. 31-32; 25.9-12).

We are living in unprecedented times, caused by a virus with profound global effects. The Lord God is allowing this thing to run as a merciful act of warning before His long-promised judgments gather pace. As always in such pre-judgment acts of mercy, He seeks deep repentance, genuine confession, a plea for forgiveness by the blood of Jesus Christ, and a radical change of direction in how leaders lead, nations behave and individuals live.

Therein are some solid ingredients for our prayers in these days. But we also take heart from Paul, who was not mad in believing that "Jesus Christ is Lord" – and nor are we mad in believing this same truth that lies at the heart of all human existence. The credentials underlying this belief, credentials which we refer to at times in these Reflections, are impeccable! - far more impeccable than most people realise, be they Christians or not, and so impeccable that it is madness NOT to believe in Christ as Lord!

We are dwelling, it must be said, amongst much madness, which pours forth on all sides, drowning out God's Truth in Christ and replacing that Truth with falsehood in its many guises.

Paul kept going, through thick and thin, upheld, even when he drooped, by the Lord's gracious guidance and support. We, on a much smaller stage, have just the same calling, in a Covid world which has suddenly been forced to stop and think. The love of God, for His fallen creation and all within it, still stands, summed up in Jesus' simple, gracious invitation, "Come, follow me". Acceptance of that invitation is as vital, and as sensible, as ever (egs., Matthew 4.17-22 / John 6.37 / Acts 2.21 & Romans 10.13 (Joel 2.32) / Romans 5.1; 8;1 / I Thessalonians 1.10; 5.9-10).

As with Paul, we are "not mad, most noble Festus", and as with Paul, we too "speak forth the words of truth and soberness", for the salvation of many souls in Christ, and for the glory of Almighty God.

