

SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: ACTS 21:1-16

Paul felt compelled to go to Jerusalem. He was completely in the dark about what would happen when he got there. He did know that it wouldn't be any picnic, for the Holy Spirit had let him know repeatedly and clearly that there were hard times and imprisonment ahead. But that mattered little to Paul. What mattered most to him was to finish what God started: the job the Lord Jesus gave him of letting everyone he met know all about this incredibly extravagant generosity of God in sending Jesus. In a nutshell, Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem because he wanted to see the Gospel spread and God's plan move forward. He knew that this requires:

DETERMINATION

The easiest thing to do would have been to head off in the opposite direction and run away from God, as Jonah did. Paul could very easily have explained it as the direction that the Spirit was taking him in, given all that was being said by people with proven prophetic gifts – their message was that the Jews in Jerusalem were going to tie him up and hand him over to godless unbelievers.

But Paul was sure that he was being taken to Jerusalem; and so despite all that he had heard, that was where he was headed.

If we want to go God's way we will need the sort of determination that Paul showed. I certainly needed that kind of determination when I was sure that going God's way meant studying theology and becoming a minister – this decision that was met by dismay and sometimes disapproval by family and friends.

COURAGE

Determination is one thing, but to step into situations where we know there is difficulty or danger requires more. Even relatively simple things like telling other people about our faith in Jesus will sometimes take a lot of courage – I remember the courage I needed to tell my parents and my sister who weren't believers that I had become a Christian – in some ways it was harder than telling my friends about my new-found faith. In situations like these, many of us find it easier to stay silent and say not a word.

Perhaps Paul's example and his conviction that God will provide the strength can encourage us. God certainly gave me the strength and courage that day and he has continued to do so as I shared my faith at school, at university, on beach missions, in holiday clubs, in the Edinburgh SU Fellowship, in Dundee, then in Ardeer and now in Penicuik.

Sacrifice

There was no easy life for Paul. In his second letter to the Christians in Corinth he tells us just how much he has suffered: “I’ve worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death’s door time after time. I’ve been flogged five times with the Jews’ thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummelled with rocks once. I’ve been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard travelling year in and year out, I’ve had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I’ve been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I’ve known drudgery and hard labour, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather. And that’s not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches.

Jesus made it absolutely clear that following him would mean taking up our cross: “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self...the real you...”

We live in a world which takes its comforts very seriously, and if we’re not careful we end up with a weak form of Christian faith which involves little cost and doesn’t look very different from the way that others live their lives.

Submission

Paul didn’t decide where to go, but he did what he believed the Lord was calling him to do, and his friends recognised this. This was the motivating force in his life. What about us – who makes our life choices and on what basis do we make our everyday decisions? What is the motivating force in our lives? Are we aiming to serve God and his purposes in all that we do or are there are other factors involved?

It’s taken me a long time getting there, but I now know that submission to what God is calling me to is the only way. “‘My way’ won’t do,” Frank and anyone else who loves the song. Our song must be: “I did it God’s way!”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Sadhu Sundar Singh came from a wealthy Hindu background in India but was met by Jesus. He describes the experience that followed: ‘I will never forget the night I was driven out of my home. I slept outdoors under a tree, and the weather was cold. I had never experienced such a thing. I thought to myself: ‘Yesterday I lived in comfort. Now I am shivering, and I am hungry and thirsty. Yesterday I had everything I needed and more; today I have no shelter, no warm clothes, no food. Outwardly the night was difficult, but I possessed a wonderful joy and peace in my heart. I was following in the footsteps of my new master – of Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head, but was despised and rejected. In the luxuries and comforts of home I had not found peace. But the presence of the Master changed my suffering into peace, and this peace has never left me.’

Going Deeper

Questions on the Bible passages, Acts 21:1-16, and on the sermon for you to think about, either on your own or in a small group:

1. What do you make of the apparently conflicting instructions given by the Spirit? What does this suggest about the way we understand and interpret the promptings of the Spirit?
2. How do you respond to the summary in verse 14? What does this say about the way in which we might live our Christian lives?