

SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: ACTS 23:12-22

I never cease to be amazed at how the right people always ‘pop up’ in the right place at the right time. When I spent 1966-67 in France as the English assistant at the Ecole Normale in Aurillac, who should pop up as the English assistant in the Lycee in the same town but a guy from Leeds who was also a Christian. I was there with David when his wife died in the City Hospital; while he was glad I was there, he wished that his and Anne’s two best Friends would arrive – just then they appeared walking along the corridor towards us. I’m sure you have similar stories, stories which can’t be just chance or coincidence. Today’s reading provides another example, Paul’s nephew popping up in the right place at the right time to be a crucial part of God’s plans at this stage. We can learn something about the people God uses from his example.

He Is Attentive

We’ve no idea how Paul’s nephew came to hear about the plot, but he obviously had his ear to the ground. Those God uses are those who pay attention to what is going on around them and can interpret the signs of the times. It is too easy on the one hand to opt out of our community and culture and so miss out on important developments, and on the other to be so immersed in what is happening in the world that we cannot stand back and discern what’s really going on. God’s servants – and that includes us – need to listen to what God has said in the Bible and to what is going on in the world.

He Is Available

Paul’s nephew could always have ignored the information he had but he didn’t – instead he made himself available. He risked the anger of a large number of murderous individuals and he also risked upsetting the notoriously volatile Roman authorities, who were already not a little nervous about a situation which had already given rise to two riots in Jerusalem and the near flogging of a Roman citizen. His own safety was secondary to the working out of God’s plan. How ready are we to make ourselves available for God to use in the situations we come across, however risky or scary they may be?

He Is Active

Even having made himself available, Paul's nephew could still have walked away, he could still have decided not to get involved, he could still have chosen to do nothing about his uncle's fate. Then evil would have triumphed and Paul would have been murdered by those who had plotted his death. Praise God, his nephew didn't give in to the temptation to do nothing – he spoke up and the conspiracy to assassinate Paul was thwarted. In a world of injustice and pain, of division and destruction, of hate and fear, too often we find it easier to walk away, to pass by on the other side, to do nothing, to stay silent, not to get involved. But we Christians aren't called to do nothing and let evil triumph – no, we Christians are called to stand for right, to work for justice, to show compassion and mercy, to build Christ's kingdom and to act in line with God's plans. When we do so, God keeps his promise to give us his help and his strength, that same mighty strength he used to raise Christ from death. When we do so, God keeps his promise to be with us and to surround us with his love from which absolutely nothing can separate us.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

‘I was looking at the pencil in my hand, and thinking about the wood which surrounds the lead. I thought to myself, “This thin piece of lead wouldn't be much use without the strong wood to hold it. Yet people only seem to be interested in the marks made by the lead, and not in the wood that supports it. So the wood has a hidden role, without which the pencil's drawing and writing would never be possible.”’

(A Ashwin, Quoted in *Discernment*, Lawrence Osborn (Grove Books))

GOING DEEPER

Questions on the Bible passages, Acts 23:12-22, and on the sermon for you to think about, either on your own or in a small group:

1. What does the attitude of the group of Jews in Acts 23:12-22 tell us about the nature of opposition? Why is it that some of the Jews eagerly accept the good news and others are so violently opposed?
2. God is not mentioned in Acts 23:12-22. Where do you see his activity?
3. What do you make of the interaction between the various characters in Acts 23:12-22? Do they seem the most obvious people to be used by God? What does that suggest about the way that God might work today?