

Acts 26:3

Therefore, I beg you, listen to me patiently

The world of the internet is changing the lives of many people who are on computer

- Through the search engine you have access to all information all over the world
- One of the interesting things you can do is to run a search on your own name
- Through which I discovered that something I had written was published in a book
- *Voices of Home Park* in which Plymouth Argyle fans offered anecdotes
- Two of mine were published:

When I was a boy we used to watch the Argyle matches from Spion Kop. Some people maintained that the wooden railway sleepers that made up a lot of the terracing were warmer for your feet than concrete. However, as it was uncovered it was wetter for your head.

My wife, Janet, was expecting a fourth baby. We were living at Barry, Wales. The midwife came to call and said to me, 'Your wife tells me that you are planning to go to Wembley on Saturday. What will you do if the baby arrives early?' I replied, 'This will be the fourth baby but Argyle have never been to Wembley before and I am not going to miss it.' Michael was born the following Wednesday.

About that time I discovered that I was mentioned in another book

- *Everyday Evangelism* by Gareth Crossley, who was my minister in my student days
- I immediately went out and bought five copies!
- It is part of a much longer section and I cannot quote it all

John came to our fellowship from a godly home in the south ... for three years he brought fellow students to meet his Christian friends ... with all of them there had been an initial conversation.

An 'initial conversation' does not sound much – often it was not much

- But what we desperately need to recover as Christians is the 'initial conversation'
- What the Anglican evangelist Michael Green calls 'gossiping the gospel'
- We need to have a heart to tell other people the good news of Jesus
- To say to a friend, to a family member, a workmate, a colleague
- I used to be like you, Jesus changed me, Jesus can change you too
- The gospel song of the 1950's sung among others by Elvis Presley says

It is no secret what God can do.
What He's done for others, He'll do for you.
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you.
It is no secret what God can do.

- But that was 50 years ago, the reality today is that what God can do is a secret
- Because even believers with the new life are reticent about sharing the good news

In Acts 26, after two years in prison, Paul is given the chance to make his defence

- That is, to give an account of his beliefs and actions
- It is an opportunity that he has longed for, not only because of his imprisonment
- But because Paul is at heart an evangelist and wants to proclaim the good news
- In terms of his imprisonment, Paul is pleased to be before a knowledgeable judge
- For King Agrippa was considered something of an authority on the Jewish religion
- In terms of his evangelical heart, for a change, Paul's audience is not antagonistic

The Roman governor, Festus, had concluded Paul had not committed a capital crime (25:25)

- Therefore, Paul chose to defend himself against the only remaining charge
- That he had transgressed against the religious views of his own people
- He insists that he once had the same attitudes as his opponents
- And asks them to listen to him patiently
- In short, the opening of his message can be summed up:

I I USED TO BE LIKE YOU

On several occasions the Apostle Paul feels the need to give his Jewish credentials

- He is pleased to do so before King Agrippa
- Realising that King Agrippa is more competent to hear his account
- Than the Romans, Claudius Lysias, Felix and Festus have been
- The King is at least aware of Jewish customs and controversies

Paul spells out his background, which is well known

- Although he was born outside of Judea at Tarsus in Cilicia
- He was brought up in Jerusalem (in another place he mentions he was well educated)
- His opponents have known him for a long time
- In his earlier years, Paul had not just been an adherent of Judaism
- But had belonged to the strict sect of the Pharisees
- The name 'Pharisees' means 'separatists'
- Those who carefully kept themselves from any legal contamination
- Ceremonial purity was vital to the Pharisees
- Who had a tendency to despise those who did not agree with them
- Paul had lived among such people

Paul points out what he sees as the great irony of his position

- It is because of the Jewish hope in the resurrection of the dead that he is on trial
- The charge being brought against him are being brought by Jews of all people
- It was not in spite of his Jewish heritage but because of it that Paul stands accused
- Paul maintains that the Jewish hope and the Christian message are inseparable
- Particularly when God had validated the truth by raising Jesus from the dead

Paul has distilled his accusers' objections to the issue of the resurrection and asks

- 'Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?' (Acts 26:8)
- They should not consider it incredible for two reasons
- Firstly, resurrection hope was part of their faith
- Secondly, God had confirmed this hope by raising Jesus

Nevertheless, Paul once thought that Christian preaching about the risen Jesus was incredible

- Not only did he oppose their beliefs
- Doing all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth
- but also he persecuted their people
- putting them in prison and voting that they be put to death
- he chased them from synagogue to another to have them punished
- trying to force them to recant and therefore blaspheme
- and in his obsession against them pursuing them to foreign cities, including Damascus

If any of his accusers and critics needed to be convinced that Paul had been like them

- Paul had managed to spell out in detail, 'I used to be like you'
- This is the 'initial conversation' that Christians need to have with others

Someone once told me that all my sermons mentioned either football or chocolate

- I was really shocked: I thought they *all* mentioned both
- But, to be fair, it's not just the sermons
- We all seem to talk readily about the things that fill our lives
- Our families, our work, our friends, our holidays, our likes and dislikes
- And yet some people say they do not have the opportunity to mention their faith
- Perhaps that is because we do not take time to have the 'initial conversation'

Some Christians I meet tell me they very much regret their testimony is not more exciting

- When you think about it carefully that is bordering on a blasphemous thing to say
- The way in which God called you, saved you, changed you is his way
- But what people often mean by that is that it does not sound very exciting
- We have all heard testimonies of people who have been dramatically converted
- And we are thankful that these are inspirational to others
- They are extraordinary testimonies from extraordinary people
- But bearing in mind that the very act of turning to Christ in faith is extraordinary
- We could do with more extraordinary testimonies from ordinary people
- People who can speak with their family, workmates, colleagues
- And then with regard to their beliefs, their lifestyle or both say, 'I used to be like you'
- And then go on to tell them:

II JESUS CHANGED ME

Paul's account of his Damascus Road conversion appears three times in Acts (9; 22; 26)

- It shows how important this event was not only for Paul but also for Luke
- Throughout the New Testament great importance is given to meeting with Jesus
- Conversions are not always as dramatic as that of the Apostle Paul
- But rather than being one of the first notable conversions after the Apostles
- Paul explains that he is the last conversion that comes from seeing Jesus face to face

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

(Acts 26:14)

The expression, 'it is hard to kick against the goads'

- Was a well-known proverb in the Greek world, often used in classical writings
- To express the futility of striving against fate or against the gods
- The meaning becomes absolutely clear
- It is futile for him to try any longer to work against Christ

In his testimony Paul emphasised the lordship of Christ and the divine commission

- In short, he was converted to Jesus and commissioned by Jesus
- Like the other apostles, Paul was a witness to the resurrection
- And commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus to be a servant and a witness

Once again we see the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian message

- By his resurrection, God accredited Jesus as the promised Saviour (Messiah)
- To be the hope of the new Israel, which consists of all the redeemed
- Although we are not all called to be preachers, like Paul
- We are all called to bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus

God appoints us as servants and witnesses to what we have experienced of Jesus (26:16)

- So much of Christian witness has been based on our buildings
- Where we hope that people will *come* to church
- But the New Testament commission is one that sends us – the commission to *go*
- Sunday by Sunday the preacher can only meet a relatively small number of people
- But that number becomes much more significant
- When multiplied by all the people that you meet, day by day and week by week

In our role as witnesses for Christ, we must respond obediently to God's call (26:19)

- It is our responsibility to tell people of the truth of God, whatever their circumstances
- To do this we must say things that are both true and reasonable (26:25)
- So that people will be persuaded by the truth of the gospel

The word 'persuade' is used seven times in Acts to describe Paul's evangelism

- Paul preached the gospel, so that people should repent and turn to God
- And prove their repentance by their deeds
- Paul and the Apostles persuaded people, that the message of Jesus was true
- The Apostles reasoned with them, at times they pleaded with them
- There was an urgency about their persuasion, reasoning and pleading
- Because to them it was a more important matter than life and death

Paul defends that what he is saying is 'both true and reasonable'

- Again it is a matter of both heart and head
- In our own Christian experience we need warmed hearts and opened minds
- And we need warmed hearts and opened minds to engage with others
- We must invite others to listen patiently to what we have to say about Jesus
- When God opens people's minds they will follow our reasoning – that is good news
- It is possible to win the argument and lose the people
- It is not a matter of winning arguments but winning people
- Proclaiming the gospel, as Paul well knew, was not a matter technique (1 Cor. 1:17)
- But telling of the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ

Paul's statement about not being "disobedient to the vision from heaven" (Acts 26:19)

- is an important statement – but the word 'vision' is sometimes misused in church
- to Paul it meant what he had seen in Jesus and had been revealed by his word
- but it causes some people to say that we need a 'vision' for the church

Now to some people 'vision' means supernatural vision

- the difficulty is that more often than not people talk in terms of a picture
- which then they feel that they have to interpret
- to other people 'vision' means something like 'strategic business plan'
- which is the more worldly sense of the word 'vision'

Occasionally I am asked what my vision is for the church

- I regard this as a somewhat difficult question
- You have to guess what the questioner means from your knowledge of the questioner
- Does it mean 'supernatural vision' which I must then attempt to interpret
- Or does it mean 'strategic business plan'
- Or, as I often suspect is the case, a combination of both

Now in case you are someone who would like to know the answer to that question

- Which ever meaning you attach to it or both
- The answer is 'a church that is becoming more biblical'
- 'A church that is becoming more and more committed to serving the Lord Jesus'
- 'And a church with a growing heart for witnessing and evangelism in the community'
- Is that a 'supernatural vision', a 'strategic business plan' or a combination of the two?
- The answer is that is the vision that the Lord Jesus gave to Paul
- And, therefore, I believe gives to us

The result of Paul's obedience to the vision from heaven is that people believed

- People's eyes were opened, they turned from darkness to light
- From the power of Satan to God, so that their sins were forgiven
- And they could have a place among those who are being made holy

There are people who seek to make the fact that they are not like Paul an excuse

- As if the conversion of others was down to the abilities of Paul
- But that is to miss the point
- When we proclaim the gospel, it is God who is speaking through us, by his Spirit
- It is he who glorifies Jesus – what God requires is not our ability but our faithfulness

So the calling of the Christian in witness is much the same as that of the Apostle Paul

- The first thing we need is an 'initial conversation'
- Until those start happening not much else will happen
- Those initial conversation need to be followed by our own testimony
- This normally requires us to tell a little of our former life
- And how things are changed through coming to faith as Jesus, risen Lord and Saviour
- Things need to go on from there, through Bible passages, Christian literature
- Invitation to an outreach event or to some place where our friend will hear the gospel

I I USED TO BE LIKE YOU

II JESUS CHANGED ME

III JESUS CAN CHANGE YOU

We only know of the responses of two people to Paul's defence, neither that positive

- As Paul was speaking, Festus interrupted – unable to stick any more
- No sensible Roman could believe in the resurrection of a man from the dead
- Festus concluded that Paul was so immersed in his Jewish traditions
- That he had lost his grip on reality – but what Festus wrote off as madness
- Paul insisted was 'true and reasonable'

Paul put a more personal challenge to King Agrippa

- The ministry of Jesus had been well-known in Judea – it was not done in a corner
- The death and resurrection of Jesus had many witnesses
- And the good news of Jesus, Saviour, crucified and risen was widely proclaimed
- It seems as if Paul was about to make a decisive challenge to the King
- 'King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.'
- But, possibly sensing that he will be forced to make a decision one way or the other
- Agrippa also interrupts,

Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?

Paul's quick response is both perceptive and witty:

Short time or long - I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.

The irony of the situation is obvious for all to see

- Paul has spoken with courage and conviction about Jesus and his resurrection
- He has given testimony saying, 'I used to be like you, Jesus changed me'
- And moves through to the challenge, 'Jesus can change you too'
- It will begin with believing in the risen Lord Jesus
- And continue with repentance and proving repentance with our deeds
- While Festus and Agrippa appear powerful and free
- In reality they are powerless and bound
- But while Paul appears powerless and bound
- In reality he is powerful and free for he has proclaimed the risen Lordship of Jesus
- And is living proof of his transforming grace

Paul was kept in prison because the leaders did not have the moral courage to release him

- While the testimony of Paul is coherent and courageous
- We also must be ready to start initial conversations with others
- Opportunities to share testimony, coherently and, if necessary courageously
- The saving grace of Jesus is a more important matter than life and death
- And so to all who will listen we say: Therefore, I beg you, listen to me patiently