

**Hexham Trinity Methodist Church**  
**Sunday 27th September 2020 - 10:30am**  
**Sermon**

Reading: Acts 26:9-29

Prayer

I wonder if you've ever been asked the question 'who are you'?

I wonder how you've answered?

If you think about it, it's a question we all get asked time and time again, asked when we meet new people, when we are in a new situation. Sometimes it's asked verbally and sometimes it's asked by looks or maybe even presumptions or prejudice. As someone who has just entered the world of the school gate as a parent I'm absolutely clear the question 'who are you' is being asked by all the parents in the reception class as we try and work out who each other are, who are children are, what we do, who we might be friends with. I'm sure verbalised or not when I drop Jethro off at a Catholic School in my clerical collar people are trying to make sense of the Priest who has a child!

'Who are you?' It is a question which on the one hand is very simple but on the other is in fact very complex. As Christians the answer to the question for me has to include the fact that we are follower of Jesus, that how we live, what we do, all from from our relationship with Jesus. Let's be clear, it's saying 'I follow Jesus' not 'I go to Church' that's really important! For church brings all sorts of connotations to peoples mind but in my experience Jesus tends to intrigue and interest people. Of course how we say that in a way that doesn't make us look weird or odd or make people run a mile is where the question gets more complex.

Fortunately for us here in the UK, saying that we are followers of Jesus doesn't put our lives at risk, doesn't put us at risk of capture or torture as it does for so many Christians around the world. I wonder how willing we would be to declare our allegiance to Jesus if it meant us facing death, of course I want to say I would happily declare my faith and face the consequences but I suspect in that moment it might not be so straightforward.

All that said my experience is that Christians don't share their faith easily, don't talk about who Jesus is to them, sometimes they choose to talk about anything but faith, look for someone else to do it, someone who's had special training or wears a clerical collar.

Throughout the whole of the book of Acts we are reminded that 'we are witnesses of these things'. All of us who choose to follow Jesus are witnesses of his saving love in our lives and all of us are called to speak of that love. If we were witnesses to a crime and the police asked us to be a

witness to that we would have no choice but to tell what we have seen. It is the same as Christians who know and have seen God's love at work in our lives, we have no choice but to be witnesses to that in the conversations we have and with the people we know and meet.

In our reading from Acts we hear St Paul doing just that, being a true witness to his faith in Jesus and in being a witness inviting others to discover Jesus for themselves. Paul isn't in an easy situation, in fact he is on trial and having been tried by Festus in chapter 25 has appeal to Caesar and is waiting to be sent to Rome for a further trial. It would be easy in this moment for Paul to deny he is a follower of Jesus and to have an easier life. But he doesn't, he stands firm to what he believes and who he is despite the fact that those who oppose him want him to be killed for his beliefs and actions.

Whilst Festus, the Governor in Caesarea, is waiting to send Paul to Rome to be tried by Caesar, King Agrippa arrives at Caesarea to pay his respects to Festus. Festus discusses Paul's case with the King and he wants to hear Paul himself. Festus arranges this on the next day and the passage we have heard this morning is part of the account that Paul gives to King Agrippa. The account Paul gives of who he is, is fascinating, in just 28 verses Paul is able to give a clear testimony of the difference that Jesus has made to his life and to offer the invitation to King Agrippa to follow Jesus.

The structure that Paul uses in his speech is really very helpful. It gives us a structure that we can use when we talk about who Jesus is. I want to look at each of the sections of Paul's speech to help us see how we can follow Paul's example in our conversations:

- Who he was before he met Jesus: v4-8 - in the verses just before our reading tonight Paul explains to Agrippa who he was before he met Jesus, how he was a Pharisee and how he kept the law. He shares that what he is about to say about Jesus fulfils the promises that he believed as a Jew. He shows that where he is now flows from and fulfils who he was as a Jew. In setting the scene, in explaining who he was previously Paul puts the story he is about to share in context for the person he is talking to. When we share our story, when we explain who we are it's important to set it in a helpful context for the person we are talking to. Only if we tell our story in a way that is contextual and makes sense to the person we are talking to will it have any impact.
- What he used to believe: v9-11 - We began tonight with verse 9, here Paul tells Agrippa that he like those who have brought him to the governor used to oppose Jesus, that he didn't understand how Jesus could be the fulfilment of God's promises, that he thought Jesus was stopping people keeping to the law, that there was a time before his faith in Jesus. When we share our story it's so important to say that there was a time before we followed Jesus, it reminds those we are talking to that there is a choice to be made to follow Jesus, that we didn't grow up as

Christians and they grew up as non believers and therefore we will always be Christians and they won't, this shows people that there is the opportunity for everyone to choose to follow Jesus. We may of course need to clarify that there was a time for us all before we believed in Jesus, even if there wasn't a time when we didn't go to church.

- Meeting Jesus v12-15 - in these verses we hear of the moment when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, how he was struck down, blinded and challenged by Jesus about why he persecuted him. Paul retells how he asked '*who are you*' and Jesus answered, v15, '*I am Jesus, who you are persecuting*'. Paul has a very dramatic introduction to Jesus, many of us, if not most of us have a much less dramatic story, but whatever our story somewhere we met Jesus, or maybe we are meeting Jesus for the first time this morning. We must be able to say where we met Jesus, or the many places we met Jesus, or the moment we were convinced that Jesus was real as Paul was convinced here. I remember for me a very specific moment of realising Jesus was there and was real at a MAYC London Weekend in Battersea park, but I also remember moments in worship as a child where I realised Jesus was present. At University I had a moment when I was leading a Bible Study where the Spirit fell on us in a way I'd never experienced before and I knew the real power of the Spirit with us in a new way. Each of our stories of meeting Jesus will be different but they must be central to our story for time and time again it is when people hear us talking about the Jesus we meet and know that faith becomes more real.
- Jesus' purpose for our lives v16-18 - after Paul recounts his dramatic meeting of Jesus he continues to explain that Jesus had a purpose for him, a task as a servant and witness, that to enable him to do this Jesus would rescue him from his own people and the Gentiles. That Jesus was sending Paul to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness. For me one of the reasons I continue to be a Christian, continue to believe in Jesus is because Jesus gives me a purpose in my life, a kingdom purpose. For me that purpose is rooted in a call to ordained ministry, to be a presbyter in the church of God, to share God's word, to celebrate the sacraments, to care for people. That's my purpose and calling, yours will be different, but each of us has a purpose and calling and being able to share that in our stories, to say this is what Jesus did for me and because of that he called me to, he asked me to, he sent me to, makes the stories we tell so much more real, connects what we believe to what we do. It gives our lives a purpose and that shows and demonstrates so much of God's love to those who we tell our stories to. It shows that our faith makes a difference in our lives today and not just when we met Jesus.
- Living it out - v19-23 - in these verse Paul tells King Agrippa how he has done what Jesus called him to. He tells him about going to Damascus, Jerusalem and all of Judea. How he preached to them and invited them to repent, how he faced opposition but that all he was doing was in line

with the prophets and their message that the Messiah would suffer and in time rise from the dead. As we tell our stories of what we are called to do, the purpose God gives us we must be able to make them real, show how that has happened in the last few weeks or months. Telling the story of how we are living our faith our now, our call out now, how we've done that in the midst of COVID make the story so much more real, so much more understandable. As we tell the story of faith it is so important that like Paul we can show how that flows from and connects to The Story, of Jesus' death and resurrection. For me part of my story of COVID has been about how God has helped me to continue to be able to preach, to share the Good News. How God has given me ideas and inspiration that has helped me to help others make sense of where God is amongst COVID, how God inspired me with the Easter poster campaign and put others around me to make that a reality.

- Conversation - v 24-29 - After Paul has shared his story he is interrupted by Festus who is clearly getting concerned that King Agrippa is being impacted by what Paul is saying. Paul takes this opportunity to change what he is saying into a conversation, to ask King Agrippa what he believes. We must remember as we share our stories that the most effective way to share is not to give a lecture but to have a conversation. It is in conversation that people can inquire, discuss and discover with us who Jesus is for themselves. In conversation we can challenge people and share our hope that those we talk with will discover Jesus' love from themselves. In conversation we can be as bold as Paul in sharing that we hope everyone will come to know Jesus as Lord.

Sharing our stories of faith, stories of why we believe in Jesus is so important and here Paul gives us a really helpful structure in doing so which we can learn from. Of course every time we speak about our faith we won't be able to go from 'Who we were' to 'conversation' but these sections in which Paul speaks of the different aspects of his life and faith remind us that there are many different parts of our story to be told and the different parts can help people to question discover and explore who God is.

Of course this is all very easy to talk about, easy to see how Paul does it, but how can we consciously be story tellers for God, how do we make sure we include Jesus when we are invited to answer the question 'who are you'?

First and foremost we have to be prepared to have a go, to not be afraid to mention our faith in conversation, to be open to the prompting of the Spirit and to look out for the hooks that enable us to bring God into the conversation.

A few weeks ago I was at the skate park on the Sele, not on a skateboard but accompanying Jethro on his scooter, I've spent a lot of time at the skatepark in the last six months. On this occasions I

got chatting to one of the teenagers who was waiting for a friend and despairing of the drone he had just bought. After a while he asked what I did and I explained I was the minister at Trinity. He was quick to say he knew nothing about Church but wanted to know what we'd been doing in lockdown, we chatted about technology, video streaming but through the conversation I was able to share what worship had been like, how people had shared very real stories of the difference God had made. He often said 'Jesus' and I simply said yes it's all about Jesus ... for me that's one of easiest hooks there is, when people say Oh My God, or Jesus, just to reply yes he's my God, yes the answer is always Jesus, is a really good way to get a conversation going. I don't know what the young lad took from the conversation, I don't know whether he has thought about God since but I know I didn't just talk about technology or skateboards with him, I know that I shared something of the difference Jesus makes and I can pray for him and pray other seeds are sown in his life. Now before you think, oh David, but you're a minister, you're trained how to do this! I'm not, hanging round the skatepark with toddlers and teenagers, trying to keep Jethro away from the smell of what some of the teenage smoke, which isn't tobacco, is not my natural environment and not something theological college trained me for! But as I go back time after time the conversations I have are a real gift and seeing how Paul speaks here really helps me to see how I can drop God into the conversation more and more. So first and foremost having a go is what we need to be willing to do to talk about faith.

The other thing we can do is practice, yes practice talking about Jesus! Who can we practice with, well look around this morning, do you know one other person here tonight? There you, there is someone you can practice with! Over the next few weeks we're all going to have a bit more time on our hands now lockdown restrictions have increased. So I've got a challenge for you, pick up the phone to someone else who is here today and talk about your faith, if it helps take these six headings and share with each other how you met Jesus, what purposes Jesus has given you now or in the past, share about how God has touched you in the last few weeks. If we can't have these conversations with each other, with our brothers and sisters in Christ how are we going to have them with anyone else!

So two ways we can be story tellers for God, we can speak more about our faith, have a go, just go for it and practice, take up the challenge to practice with someone else who is here tonight.

We are all called to be story tellers for Jesus, when we are story tellers for Jesus as St Paul was, many many more people will hear of his great saving love. Let us tell stories of the Jesus who brings light and hope, life and love to us and all the world even in the midst of a global pandemic. I don't know about you but that's a story I will never tire of hearing. Amen.