

Called to the Cross  
Acts 22:3-24

After hearing Paul's sermon to the people of Jerusalem, we might be scratching our heads along with that ancient Roman captain or commander. For what exactly did Paul say that made his listeners cry so against him, that made them want to kill him?

After all, this wasn't the first Christian sermon preached in the streets of Jerusalem. Remember, just 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, Peter had proclaimed His resurrection on Pentecost. And on that occasion, Peter had held nothing back: he had publicly, and rightly, accused the people of Jerusalem for putting their Messiah to death on a cross. But instead of wanting to kill Peter, his listeners had been pierced to the heart, begging to know what they needed to do to be saved from their terrible sin. Yes, after hearing Peter's sermon, 3000 people had joined the church.

So, why did the people of Jerusalem have such a different reaction to Paul's sermon? After all, unlike Peter, Paul didn't directly accuse his listeners of being guilty of Christ's crucifixion. In fact, it doesn't seem to have been anything Paul said about Jesus' identity that enraged them. After all, in verse 8, he explained that Jesus the Nazarene was the one who spoke to him while he was heading to Damascus: and given that Paul's journey took place well after the crucifixion of Christ, that means that Jesus not only rose from the dead but ascended into heaven. Moreover, in verse 14, Paul insists that Jesus was the Righteous One, a title the Jews of the day used for the Messiah they were expecting to appear at any moment. Yes, Paul presented a thoroughly Christian view of Jesus, but his listeners didn't shout him down after hearing any of those things.

Moreover, it doesn't seem that Paul's listeners cared that he himself had renounced his former hostility to Jesus. They even kept silent when, in verse 16, he explained that our sins can be forgiven, not by following all the Old Testament rituals, but simply by calling on the name of Christ. No, what seems to have set them off was Paul's simple statement that the risen Christ specifically told him to proclaim the good news of salvation to the Gentiles. It was only then that they started crying out for Paul to be killed.

So, why did the Jerusalem crowd hate Paul and his preaching so much? We can't escape the conclusion that it was not their theological convictions but their jealousy. Yes, it was their desire to keep the blessings of God for themselves and their kinfolk that made them cry out for Paul's blood.

But this wasn't the only time that unbelieving Jews had demonstrated this kind of jealousy. All the way back in Acts chapter 5, we find that it was because of their jealousy that the priests and Sadducees threw all the apostles in jail (Acts 5:17). And this wasn't just a problem in Jerusalem. No, when Paul preached in Pisidian Antioch, a place in what is now called Turkey, the whole city – including many Gentiles – gathered to hear him. And that's when the Jews of that town started contradicting everything Paul said about Jesus – once again because they were filled with jealousy (Acts 13:45).

And we see the same pattern repeated during Paul's first trip to Europe, to the city of Thessalonica in Greece. Once again, Paul's preaching attracted not only Jewish members of the synagogue there, but also "a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks." And what was the result? Once again, the unbelieving Jews became jealous, and incited a violent mob (Acts 17:4-5).

So, why were the unbelieving Jews so violently and consistently opposed to Paul? Because he dared to embrace the Gentiles, because he dared to offer the grace of God to people the Jews

considered to be unclean. Yes, it seems that the unbelieving Jews' preference for their own culture and their own people simply overrode any Scriptural or logical evidence that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of David Whom God had promised to their ancestors thousands of years earlier. And as a result, they lost out on the blessing of their Messiah just because they didn't want anyone else to have Him.

How sad, and how shortsighted. But were they the only people to consider culture and kinship to be more important than Christ? Think for example of the worship wars which are dividing the church today: Christians refusing to worship together because some prefer drums and guitars and others prefer choirs and organs. But is our musical culture really more important than the fellowship of the saints?

And what about those who refuse to engage in cross-cultural missions, whether at home or abroad? You know, one estimate shows that only 24% of all Christian workers are laboring among the unevangelized, and only 2% of all missions giving goes to support work among unreached people groups. The world is waiting to hear the good news of Jesus, but how many of us can be bothered to tell them, or even to support those who do?

And as modern American culture drifts farther and farther away from its Christian foundations, how many of us are willing to reach out to the unchurched or dechurched? Or do we find their fashions or their manners or their politics too offputting – in much the same way that the Ancient Jews despised their Gentile neighbors?

No, the modern Church no longer excludes people because of their ethnic heritage, but are we just as guilty of preferring the comforts and familiarity of their own culture to the call of Christ? Are we really doing any better than Paul's opponents did in actively reaching out to those we might consider strange or different?

Ananias did. Remember, Paul began his Jerusalem sermon by recounting how he himself had been an enemy and even a persecutor of Christians. But after he had been stricken blind on the road to Damascus, Paul explained that God told Ananias, one of the very Christians Paul was trying to imprison, to go and call him a Christian brother, so that Paul might regain his sight. And after Ananias overcame his quite reasonable fear of Paul, and after Ananias had welcomed his former enemy into the Church, Paul went on to engage in the same sort of outreach, becoming a witness for Christ among the Gentiles, in spite of how culturally and religiously strange he probably found them to be.

But can we be honest? How many of us are willing to take the same kind of risks that Ananias and Paul did in order to enlighten such different and even dangerous people? After all, it's much easier just to cut off those who disagree with us, to have nothing to do with those who despise us. But how many of us are willing to take the initiative to reach out to those who might very well reject us or even hurt us?

Now, this kind of cross-cultural communication was one area in which the Ancient Romans excelled. After all, their far-flung empire held sway over everyone from the Egyptians to the Britons, providing a system of roads and laws and even a common language that allowed commerce to flow freely over the entire Mediterranean basin and beyond. And because they worshipped all kinds of different gods, the Romans didn't care what Paul believed about Jesus, and they certainly weren't jealous. They didn't try to prevent anyone else from offering sacrifices to the particular deities they worshipped.

But they were willing to tie Paul up and scourge him, to beat him with a whip, in order to discover the cause of the disturbance in Jerusalem. And that's because if culture didn't matter so much to them, control did. Yes, that's the reason the Roman legions were stationed in Jerusalem: not to force the Jews to worship Roman gods, but simply to keep order, to keep the imperial system running smoothly.

In fact, the entire empire was based on this kind of military force. After all, that's why each emperor ruled: not because he had been elected by the Senate and people of Rome, but because he had the backing of the empire's legions of soldiers. And that is why Roman magistrates were accompanied by officials called lictors bearing bundles of birch rods called "fasces:" they used those rods to beat anyone who dared to disobey the edicts of their rulers. Yes, that's why the Roman soldiers were perfectly willing to use whatever force was necessary to discover the reason for the Jerusalem riot: they just wanted peace and quiet, and they didn't care what they had to do to get it.

Now, we modern American Christians would never support such brutal abuse. For our legal system is not based on the Roman Empire but on the Roman Republic: on the rule of law, not of men. Yes, that's why we uphold the rights of every American, rights that our veterans fought to make sure we could keep, including the right to be treated justly, to be considered innocent until proven guilty. Unlike the Roman Empire and the mid-twentieth century Fascists who aped their brutal ways, we Americans don't look to the fasces, to governmental force to keep order. Instead, our recent round of elections confirms our belief that free men and women can govern ourselves through our representatives, making and then following our own laws without having to be savagely beaten in order to stay in line.

But are we modern American Christians any less interested in control than the Ancient Romans were – at least where it comes to our own individual lives? For in spite of our profession of faith in Christ as our Lord, do we insist on deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong? And when we have important decisions to make, do we trust in our own reason or feelings or experience, instead of the clear Word of God? Do we remain firmly in the driver's seat of our own lives? Or are we truly willing to surrender ourselves to God, to go wherever He sends us, even if it means giving up our comfort and convenience and control of our lives, even if it means putting ourselves in harm's way?

Paul was. For in spite of the danger the Holy Spirit said was awaiting him there (Acts 20:22-23), he had returned to Jerusalem to preach the gospel to his enemies. Yes, in chapter 21 and verse 13, Paul had gone so far as to proclaim, "I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Yes, as he stood before that hostile mob, Paul had completely abandoned Himself to the will of God, giving up any notion of control over his own life. Are we willing to do the same thing so that others might be saved?

But there's one more challenge this passage places before us. For if we are called to cross cultural barriers with the gospel, and if we are called to give up our own comfort and the control of our own lives in order to expand Christ's kingdom, we must also be willing to encourage others who embrace this difficult calling. And that is not an easy thing to do, especially when we see our loved ones heading into harm's way. After all, while Paul was in Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus warned Paul that the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem would bind him and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And as a result, all of Paul's friends began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem, weeping to the point where it broke Paul's heart (Acts 21:11-13). Yes, because of their love for Paul, his friends made his calling a lot harder.

But they weren't the only ones to have this kind of reaction to the suffering of others, were they? For when Jesus told His disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to be rejected and killed by the religious leaders, Peter took Him aside and rebuked him. In fact, right up to the point of His crucifixion, none of Jesus' disciples encouraged Him in His calling to suffer and die. Instead, once they realized that He was not going to Jerusalem to establish His earthly kingdom, all of them abandoned Him. They just couldn't see how the pain and shame of the cross could be part of God's plan for anyone.

But it was for Jesus, no matter what His disciples might have thought. In fact, as our responsive reading from Hebrews 2 makes clear, it was precisely through Christ's sufferings that He was crowned with glory and honor. For it was only because He was willing to taste death that many sons and daughters have been brought to glory. Yes, the only way Jesus could make propitiation for the sins of all His people was to suffer and die for us, offering up the blood of His perfect sacrifice on our behalf as our great High Priest.

In a similar way, suffering was part of God's plan for Paul, no matter how many tears his friends may have shed for him. For, as the rest of the book of Acts makes clear, going to Jerusalem, being arrested, and eventually being sent to the capital city of the empire as a prisoner – these were all parts of God's plan for Paul to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles in Rome. Moreover, it was precisely because Paul spent so much time in prison that he ended up writing all the letters that make up so much of the New Testament, letters that continue to edify and encourage the Church, thousands of years after they were written.

And God continues to call His people to proclaim the gospel in all sorts of strange, uncomfortable, and even violent areas: to Muslims in the Middle East, to proud atheists on American college campuses, to those all around us who would shout us down and try to "cancel" anyone who dares to disagree with them for any reason – even to those we know so well who have hurt us most deeply. And yes, reaching out to any of these kinds of people is much more likely to be painful than pleasant, much more likely to be risky than to be rewarding.

So, we have a choice to make. Will we go on clinging to our cultural preferences and traditions as the unbelieving Jews did? Will we go on trying to control our own lives in much the same way the Ancient Romans tried to control their world? Will we shrink from sharing in the sort of suffering and danger that Ananias and Paul and Jesus embraced? Will we thus reject the way of the cross?

Or will we surrender ourselves completely to God? Will we go outside of our comfort zones, willing to risk our time, talent and treasure so that others might be saved? Will we encourage others who thus walk the way of the cross? And will we join them?