

Faith Under Trial

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of August 1999. The preacher is Ian Wakehart.

His sermon is entitled Faith Under Trial and is from Acts 23 verses 1 to 35.

Our loving Father, we ask you now for the great blessing which you bestow when you open our hearts and minds to taking your word and we ask that you continue to form our lives according to the pattern we find here.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, tonight we're moving on in the Acts of the Apostles pretty well to the three-quarter point in that we're now into chapter 23.

Now, as you heard, as you listened to the reading a moment ago, chapter 23 begins with a trial. Lysias, the commander, wanted to find out what this commotion was about, what the Jews really had, why the Jews had Paul on the gun.

[1 : 1 7] So, the last verse of chapter 22 says, he brought Paul down and had him stand before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. This trial is the first of four between now and the end of the book of Acts.

Also, just as this book brings with it the beginning of a series of trials of Paul, it also brings to an, or marks the apparent end of Paul's missionary journeys.

There are three missionary journeys which if you read carefully because sometimes the action is moving so fast you can miss the starting and finishing points. But if you read carefully, you will find the starting and finishing points for three distinct missionary journeys.

So, Paul comes to Jerusalem and to a situation which gets worse instead of better. But in fact, it's the prelude to what will be his fourth missionary journey.

He will go to Rome to testify to Jesus. And what I'm going to be taking tonight in particular are two of the, what I call the people threads in this chapter.

[2 : 3 6] The first thread is about people generally under the heading people who are just being people warts and all.

The second thread picks up those people who are noted here as people who are standing nearby at various times. First thread then, people just being people warts and all.

Now, in this chapter we meet all kinds of human behaviour and of course a lot of it not particularly nice. There are people here who are engaging in expediency.

There's people engaging in conspiracy and some are improving their hopes of certainty. now, if I recast the words expediency conspiracy and certainty like this.

one, telling the public only what it suits you for them to know at the moment. Secondly, branch stacking in local political parties and thirdly, laying bets on athletes who are using steroids.

[4 : 0 6] You will see that when it comes to expediency, conspiracy and certainty, some things haven't changed very much in 20 centuries. Now, of course, in all of this God has lessons for life and particularly in the kinds of things I've just spoken about.

Now, these days, the word expediency has taken on a fairly sort of a dark tinge.

I'm sure its original dictionary meaning meant just doing what was necessary to get things done. But these days, it has a strong sense of doing what suits you or doing a job the way it suits you best at the time without actually telling a black lie.

And the current Oxford Dictionary says that expediency or practicing expediency is being more politic than just.

And that's one of the places where this is happening is in verse 9 where Paul has just what I regard as a magnificent job. I'm not quite sure what heaven thought of this but I think Paul did a magnificent job of throwing a cat in amongst the pigeons by shouting out in the Sanhedrin assembly I am a Pharisee, a son of the Pharisees, I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection for the dead.

[5 : 36] Now what he spoke was God's truth about God's truth and about himself and that really started things up.

One of the Pharisees stood up in verse 9 and says we find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him? Now the Pharisee is not saying this as a matter of justice, it's a matter of politics.

As the dictionary said to operate with expediency is all too often being more politic than just. The Pharisee was not putting his neck on the block to get justice for Paul.

He was out to get some leverage against his political and religious enemies the Sadducees. Another kind of expediency, one which is still widely practiced in the Commonwealth Public Service, it shows up in verse 27 where the Roman tribune or commander Claudius Lysias writes to his governor Felix in Caesarea and writing about Paul says this man was seized by the Jews.

True. And was about to be killed by them. True. But when I learned that he was a Roman citizen I came with a guard and rescued him. slight massaging of the order of facts.

[7 : 16] And I'm sure as Luke recorded this he must have been smirked to himself. So no Lysias it didn't quite happen in that order. As Warwick pointed out last week in preaching through Acts 22 this Roman tribune had blundered and put his own life on the line actually.

He had blundered by ordering a flogging for Paul the Roman citizen before there had been a fair trial or inquiry. Here the tribune covers his back with a little expediency.

And when I made what I don't believe to be an unfair remark about the Commonwealth Public Service I said that because I have a friend who like me is a retired technician whatever that means. He worked for the ABC while I was working for Telstra we're both the same age.

One day when we get together we love to talk shop about the good old days and one day he was telling me how they covered up in the ABC when in a radio broadcast there was an embarrassing silence because someone had pulled a cord or thrown a switch in the studio or out in the equipment room they shouldn't have.

These things were noticed and sometimes the minister or the postmaster general himself as he would call would send a blister down demanding to know why that had happened and why the perpetrators shouldn't be sacked.

[8 : 47] And my friend Graham was telling me the way this was handled was the boss when getting this blister the supervising technician would say well I've got a theory about this it was probably the failure of an electron tube the old fashioned equivalent of a transistor.

and so he would send this off. Now the advantage that he had was he was a technical man and he probably believed unfairly I suppose that some of the management people couldn't even spell electron tube so that they were very impressed when they had a letter from someone who could.

And management always swallowed these stories so it was expedient always to tell management there had been an electrical equipment failure and not to admit to any human failures.

Nothing much has changed since Claudius Lysias. Do you realise though what is happening at this point in Acts?

What's happening here as the narrative goes on Luke is God's pen man. And as a salutary reminder for us about things that get recorded here a pen man it's an old expression pen man or pen woman is someone who keeps a daily written log of events and conversations on behalf of some higher official.

[10 : 16] Once upon a time in certain work locations there was a person who was the pen man or pen woman for the day and their job they kept a log of phone calls and they kept a log of conversations with customers and so on and they did that on behalf of the manager.

Luke is God's pen man here and what's happening as Luke writes these two grubby incidents of expediency are now on public record.

Here they are in the pages of the New Testament forever. And that is a useful reminder to all of us as God's continuing church that what happens is recorded.

Recorded in heaven. So when you and I are tempted to take some expedient path remember that just as Luke was recording the expediency stunts of the Pharisees and of Claudius Lysias in the same way our little shortcuts and things are also being recorded.

It's good to remember as a kind of a preventative the words from Proverbs 28. It is better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways though rich.

[11 : 48] And what's more it is so embarrassing when you get found out. The thing is there are some things might not be found out in this life but they'll certainly be in open books on judgment day.

The second human trait conspiracy and that's quite clearly here it's what's happening from verses 12 to 21. In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves in an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.

That's a woman I went a few months ago to see the film Conspiracy Theory with Mel Gibson and it was a good escapist kind of a film but the conspiracy thing is just the same as here.

There is someone that the system wanted to get rid of so the system pulled every kind of murderous ambush they could to get rid of the person with the knowledge.

Now when it comes to religious the religious arena all too often when there's a conspiracy those conspiring believe firmly they are doing it to do God a favour and Jesus warned the disciples and us about this in John chapter 16 he said to his friends the night before his crucifixion he said to them those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God and that's what these 40 odd Jews were up to.

[13 : 30] Unfortunately it's something that's happened since then sort of thing during the Spanish Inquisition something that was perpetrated in the medieval church to try and sort out the bad boys and girls and get rid of them so Muslims and Jews were hounded to jail and eventually to death and people whose faith perhaps wasn't too orthodox they were likewise either jailed or executed and one of the shocking things shocking ways this was approached in Spain was when an execution was to be held of someone who sort of wasn't quite kosher as a Christian when the day came it was the actual execution was promoted as an auto defy which is Spanish for an act of faith right so it wasn't just the the Pharisees and Sadducees who wanted to do that it's also been leaders in the church hierarchy that have grown into the same stuff look at the people involved in this conspiracy and learn from looking at them first of all the priests in verse 15 now what happens is the conspirators approach the priests and the elders and say they start giving orders in verse 15 they say now then you and the council must notify the tribune to bring Paul down to you on the pretext etc and we are ready to do away with him the priests and elders are so morally weak as religious leaders that they are all too easily kicked sideways into allowing a murder conspiracy to set their agenda and look at the 40 plotters how many of them were men who were sort of pulled in by the high sounding talk of the leaders of the mob and said yeah we've got to get rid of this

Paul and as time went by they began to have doubts what an awful position to be in because as soon as you start expressing doubts you're dead in that kind of context think about the long term effect of being a plotter like that they've bound themselves to starve to death if necessary part of their ambition to get Paul killed but how do they look by the time you get to verse 35 some days later when Paul is safely in Caesarea in Roman custody how would you look to your mates and to your families by the times known that Paul is safely in Caesarea very thin very stupid probably both and now to the certainty events there's two certainty events in this chapter one is human one is divine the human one is in verse 23 the Roman tribune is making dead certain that Paul the Roman citizen arrives safely at Antipatris verse 23 he summons two of his centurions and he wants them to round up 200 soldiers 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen and get Paul safely to Caesarea he wants to be certain that Paul's going to be got there safe because if something happens to Paul on the way and people start talking about the the flogging that nearly happened then this commander is going to be in deep trouble so he's covering his back by making certain that Paul is going to arrive safely in Caesarea interesting that this man includes 200 spearmen in the escort one could say with tongue in cheek that he was making sure that if those 40 Jews attempted their ambush they will be turned into a holy assembly that is 40 men 200 spears 5 holes per person now in case you think

Luke was just building the lily with his story or Claudius was overdoing it it's useful to know that guerrilla activity banditos and so on by this time in Jerusalem and around Jerusalem was getting pretty ferocious it made the story of the man who fell foul of the thieves on the Jericho road looked pretty tame what the Roman army was continually happy to get on top of so he was just taking no chances that's the human certainty the divine certainty is in verse 11 where at the end of the verse God says to Paul that you're going to bear witness to me in Rome well within three years because there was a long imprisonment in Caesarea within three years Paul was in Rome bearing witness to Jesus which really brings us to the second thread in this passage that's the thread of the people who stood near

Paul because one of the people who stood near Paul will come to in a few moments is the Lord himself but there are people who are recorded who were standing near Paul in verses 2 11 and 17 in verse 2 we've got this pretty cowardly violent episode where the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him in the mouth here was this unnamed person person or person standing near Paul literally within striking distance it really is appropriate that this person is not named because there's someone without a mind of their own they were quite content to become a mere extension of Ananias arm but as we follow what happens here we see that other people standing near

Paul were perhaps a bit concerned for him and said in effect if you keep on insulting the high priest your head will come off and Paul says and I'm sure it's the truth he didn't know that the man sitting in that chair was in fact the high priest I see it is quite significant that Paul didn't know this man was high priest you see heaven did not know him as high priest either Ananias and his friends their religious system and temple had been superseded three decades before that is at the time of the crucifixion when Jesus died on the cross his life was given as one sacrifice for sins forever all further episodes of offering sacrifices for sin after the cross are pointless and if you look at it theologically they are in fact blasphemous and you can check that for yourself by reading

[21 : 15] Hebrews chapter 10 carefully but that's all spelled out so friends as a high priest Ananias is a mere usurper Paul has a high priest our great high priest our Lord Jesus Christ that's how he's described and demonstrated to be truly our high priest in the letter to the Hebrews our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven and just as there's no purpose on a high priest on earth and anyone bearing the name is a usurper after Calvary in the same way there's no temple on earth because there doesn't need to be we are God's temple on earth and it was the apostle Paul who said that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit that's just a few verses from that episode that nasty episode with Ananias so just a few verses on from there to verse 11 where we see that there is a high priest in heaven and he knows

Paul that night the Lord stood near him and said keep up your courage this verse is a great source of ultimate certainty and security that is the high priest our great high priest knows and stands with his people now the Lord himself knew better than any human being what Paul needed most that night ever since Paul had arrived in Jerusalem and he had arrived in Jerusalem on a really good errand bringing money money for the poor Christians he was bringing some welfare funds in which should have at least pleased the Roman administration that some poor people were going to be helped at least and also he is reporting in to the church about his activities but from the moment he had arrived things had gone bad really bad and they had got worse but it's times like that when doubts about what you are doing can be the most ferocious and powerful it's almost predictable although there is no joy in saying it it's almost predictable at times like that we

Christians when things are getting worse instead of better we ask ourselves am I really going God's way is all this stuff a whole lot of roadblocks where God is saying no no no you're going the wrong way come on pay attention to me and I'll show you the right way that's certainly not what was happening with Paul but that's the way it sometimes goes we can feel so discouraged and as Paul said a while ago depressed when things are going really bad that we wonder if we're right off track on this particular occasion God said I will go and visit Paul myself now I know bishops don't quite rank on the divinity scale with God not by a long straw even though there are some very godly bishops but it was one very important night for a woman and I that a bishop came to see us Bob Butters who was bishop of this region at the time he retired some years ago he knew that the church in which I was the curate doing the sort of job that Phil

Millman's doing here was in commotion and he also knew that woman and I were suffering because of it so one night he was sitting at home with his wife Margaret and he said to her I really ought to nip out and see how the white carts are doing things are terrible at Glen Waverly at the moment this is going back to 1985 86 so he hopped out of his comfortable lounge chair in his warm lounge room in Canterbury jumped in his car and drove out to Vermont and knocked on the door and rather startled Wilmer who wasn't really expecting to open the door to knock and see a bishop standing there he didn't quite look like a bishop because he had his old sloppy joe on hadn't put his purple stock or his white collar on or anything like that but when she got over shock she invited him in I wasn't there because I was at another fruitless vestry meeting as it happened he'd come to see how we were doing one of the things that that meant to us was that he was seeing clearly that we weren't the cause of this commotion in that unfortunate church but we and a lot of other people were suffering because of it sometimes

God will ask any Christian to go and be the one on his behalf who goes and visits when you've been in pastoral work for some years you've got quite a logbook so to speak of conversations where people have just wanted to unburden themselves to talk about the current problems and as they've talked about their problems they realised that you weren't positioned to do much for them but at the end of the conversation for them to say it's been so good thank you for just listening because that's lowered the stress level a bit and God doesn't need to go himself to make that happen he doesn't need to send a bishop to make that happen just a believer prompted by him and going in obedience so it is that the Lord rarely does the visiting himself he usually sends someone else

[27 : 08] I mention this because some Christians I'm sure not all Christians but some Christians perhaps who are emotionally sensitive or emotionally hungry stand at risk of wishing that they could have an experience like that as well that's one reason why some preachers don't talk about their own close experiences with God because they know that there are people in the congregation who will come up to them afterwards and say how can I organise things so that will happen to me as well and people like that eventually if they're not careful become basket cases spiritually I remember some years ago being really chuffed being at a small group meeting where a lady being invited along by the minister to give her testimony she'd been an alcoholic and boy she'd been in the pits with it God had touched her life she'd come to

Christ thoroughly converted and one of the things she was doing in God's service was giving her testimony to small home groups and it was exciting to hear a story what God had done in her life and what he was doing with her as a Christian lady and one of the things she told us was when she was wondering at one stage what direction she should be taking in God's service she was doing something very ordinary like there was Paul in his prison cell at the Jerusalem barracks when suddenly the Lord was standing beside him well one morning this lady said I was vacuuming in the lounge and suddenly there was a brilliant light in the lounge there with me and a voice speaking from it and she said I just collapsed to my knees realising that God had come to see me and the voice said I have called you and chosen you and then the light disappeared and she knew from that that God was assuring her that the particular path she started to take was the path he'd chosen for her one of the men sitting listening to the testimony when question time came he said quite plaintively how how did that happen in effect how could

I get God to come and see me like that as well and then she said but you don't engineer those things she said it was something totally unexpected for me just as it was totally unexpected for Paul but if you know in your heart of hearts you might incline that way and might wonder if you haven't had a visit from God what it means to somehow you're sub-spiritual no that stuff's not true and there's always the possibility of being pleasantly surprised later on I've actually I've never had an experience quite like that myself but I just love hearing from people I've had I had a lady at this troubled in Waverly church after a service like this say to me I just want to talk to someone about something that's happened I want to know what it means so when I went around I had a cup of tea with this lady she told me how she was in bed one night reading and the room was filled with light and she felt like she'd never felt before and she was aware there was divine presence there and she said this went about three hours and then it stopped and she wondered if it was God at work and as I noted the transformation in her life how she moved in that time from being a normal church goer to being a person who really knew

Jesus personally had come to a living faith I had to say well for his reasons God came and visited you like that but beyond that I wouldn't try to explain and as I recall she's the only person that I've met with that story and now there's the centurion in verse 17 someone else standing near Paul standing close enough that when Paul called out to him take my nephew to the tribune for he has something to report to him here we have a man who took his responsibilities to Roman citizens quite seriously and apparently he did it as a matter of course when Paul called him and asked him to do something he just did it he was doing something for a fellow Roman citizen so it's rather sad to see that on the broad canvas of Acts chapter 23 a scenario which continues to this very day that sometimes

God's people get treated better by good-natured pagan officials than by religious leadership so next time you're treated well by some pagan official you might have expected to treat you some other way don't knock it in fact you can witness quite effectively by saying thank you they get very few of those thank yous well as I said at the beginning this is a chapter of people who are just being people warts and all these people who are into expediency conspiracy certainty bad people good people those who stood near Paul and showed either hate or grace and of course of all of these the Lord himself brought the greatest race things now as we think or as we look back across chapter 23 of what people wanted to do and in some cases succeeded in doing even though they had to use expedient techniques to do it as we look at the whole picture it's good to sum it up in another statement from the book of

[33 : 09] Proverbs the human mind plans the way but the Lord directs the steps may he bless us with a thorough conviction of that for ourselves Amen