

Acts 23.12–24

Paul's nephew saves the day

Amington

Sunday 19 July 2018

Anon. but not a non (4)

Listening

Three old ladies were taking a walk one fine day. One remarked to the other, 'Windy, isn't it?' 'No,' the second woman replied, 'It's Thursday.' The third lady chimed in, 'So am I. Let's stop for a cup of tea.'

An old couple were sitting in church one Sunday morning. The husband leaned across to his wife and whispered, 'I just let out a really long silent fart – what do you think I should do?' His wife whispered back, 'Well first, you need to change the batteries in your hearing aid.'

Another elderly couple were driving across the country. The wife was driving, and she was stopped by a police officer. He walked up to her window and asked, 'Ma'am, did you know you were speeding?'

The woman is hard of hearing, so she turned to her husband and said, 'What did he say?' The old man yelled back, 'He says you were speeding!'

The policeman said, 'Can I see your driving licence please?' The old woman turned to her husband and said, 'What did he say?' The old man yelled back, 'He says he wants to see your driving licence!'

After seeing her licence, the policeman said, 'I see you're from Birmingham – I went out with a girl from Birmingham once, she was the ugliest woman I've ever met.'

The old lady turned to her husband and said, 'What did he say?' He yelled back, 'He says he's met you before!'

I apologise if you are old, or hard of hearing, or both – they really made me chuckle!

There's a lot of listening going on in today's passage – and a lot of *not* listening. Let's look at it together, and see what's going on.

Context

In Acts 23, Paul has just been arrested in Jerusalem, mostly for his own safety. A mob of Jews tried to lynch him (22.30-31), but the commander of the Jerusalem garrison heard about it, rushed down to the crowd, arrested Paul, and took him away – the crowd were so violent he had to be carried by the soldiers (22.32-36)!

The soldiers were about to flog Paul when he revealed he was a Roman citizen (22.24-25). So he was released the next day to speak before the Sanhedrin (22.30) – but again the uproar was so great the commander had to forcibly remove Paul and take him back to the garrison for his own safety (23.10).

As Luke relates the events, you can feel the pressure rising, the atmosphere in Jerusalem boiling over – which led to more than forty men making a very silly vow.

The Vow (12-15)

A group of men – **more than forty** of them (13) – decided **not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul** (12). They confirmed it with a **solemn oath**, and then involved **the chief priests and the elders** in their conspiracy (14).

There is a huge irony here – these men, and the religious leaders of God’s own people, took an oath to do something that was the complete opposite of what God actually wanted.

It’s easy to judge their foolish vow.

But how easy it is for us humans to become so convinced of something, so convinced we are right, that we refuse to listen to reason, to other people, or to God himself.

My satnav and I regularly have a battle like this. It is convinced it knows the best way, and so am I. Usually the route we choose is the same – but sometimes it isn’t. And then we have a little fight. ‘Turn around when possible,’ it says, when I decide I know what’s best, and ignore the route it’s chosen for me.

It’s a trivial example – sometimes I *do* know better, because there are road signs telling me the road is closed. Sometimes *it* knows better, because there’s traffic ahead I don’t know about.

But as these forty men and the chief priests show, sometimes we can treat God like that too – we can insist we know what’s best and what’s right, so much so that we stop listening to him.

That’s why one of my most frequent prayers is that God would keep me (1) open and receptive, and (2) discerning – so I can hear what God is saying, and filter out all the noise.

Friends, these people here were religious *leaders*, the ones who took their faith *seriously* – but they got it *completely* wrong. We don’t know what happened to them. Some of them may well have starved themselves to death. The leaders probably found a legal loophole to get themselves out of it.

But what’s going to happen to *you*? When you pray, how much time do you give for listening, as well as talking and requesting? If you’re like me, you won’t hear an audible voice, but you start to see things differently, you form impressions, verses from Scripture come to mind, you see pictures – there are as many ways of God speaking as there are people who listen!

I’m still learning how to do it, how to listen to God. How do you listen to God?

The Rescue (16-24)

Tom Wright tells the following story:

In the newspapers there was a story about a woman who had a ridiculously narrow escape. She had stepped out of her office for just a moment of fresh air, when a car, whose driver had suddenly fallen ill, came crashing through the window and landed right on the chair she'd been sitting on not a minute before.

Tom Wright, Acts For Everyone (Part 2), 171

In the news this week was the story of the bridge that collapsed in Genoa, killing at least 39 people. I read about a British family who stopped for a toilet break before they reached the bridge, meaning they were at the back of the queue, and therefore able to leap out of their car and run to safety.

Many of us will have or know similar stories of narrow escapes – big or small. And as Tom Wright goes on to say, for every person who escapes, there is someone who *doesn't* escape.

Why do some live and others die? I don't know because, thankfully for everyone, I'm not God. We can't answer that question. Even in Acts, some – like Peter – are miraculously saved from prison, while others – like James – are killed. Why?

I don't know – it's for God to know, and for us to pray.

Back in Jerusalem, Paul's nephew – we don't know his name – **heard of this plot** to kill Paul (16). Luke is frustratingly light on the details – how did he find out? Was he a boy? A young man? Did people try to involve him in the plot, or did he hear about it on the street? Was he a believer? How did he get into the army base so easily to see Paul?

We don't know, but **he went into the barracks and told Paul** (16), who called **one of the centurions** (17), who took Paul's nephew **to the commander** (18). He told the commander the whole story (20-21). Presumably the request to transfer Paul had already come in – the commander ordered a detachment of **two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea** that very night, accompanying Paul to the palace of the governor, **Felix** (24).

That's a ridiculous number of soldiers. Even if – as some people think – the word 'spearmen' actually means 'spare horses' – that's still 270 soldiers! A couple of dozen trained Roman soldiers would be more than a match for the forty conspirators – even 270 seems a little ridiculous, let alone 470.

But who was protecting Paul that night? The Romans? Or was it perhaps *God* keeping Paul safe, showing him in an over-the-top way that he was behind all this?

Look back with me at verse 11:

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’

Acts 23.11 (NIV)

The next chapters are all about Paul’s imprisonment and journey to Rome. As a prisoner of the state, he travelled there a) for free and b) in safety, surrounded by an armed guard, from all over the Empire, with whom he was able to share the gospel.

And so, at the start of that journey, Paul was kept safe thanks to the bravery of a young man, whose name we’ll never know. Thanks to him, we have Paul’s letters to the churches in Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and his letters to Philemon, Timothy and Titus – all of which were written after this point.

We don’t know the young man’s name, but what an impact he had on history. He wasn’t a superhero, but he was brave, and – at risk to himself – he saved his uncle’s life.

Have any of you heard of Albert McMakin? I suspect not – unless you know this story. He was a farmer who came to faith in Jesus, and wanted to share this new faith with a friend, one of the farm boys. He took him to hear a travelling preacher – every night they went, until the farm boy gave his life to Jesus.

That farm boy's name? Billy Graham – and I suspect you *have* heard of him. In fact some of you here have *heard* him.

Albert McMakin and Paul's nephew weren't superheroes. They were ordinary people, like you and me. They had no idea what God would do through their actions, and actually it doesn't matter.

The point here isn't what God did through their actions – that's for God to worry about, not us. When we share our faith with a friend, they are unlikely to become the next Billy Graham.

But that doesn't matter – the point here is *their faithfulness*.

People often ask me, 'Where are we going?' as a church family. To that question, I answer, and will keep answering: 'I don't know.' Paul's nephew had no idea what Paul would go on to do. *But that doesn't matter*. What matters is doing the right thing: living faithful and holy lives *today*. 'Do not worry about tomorrow,' said someone rather important, 'For today has enough cares of its own.'

Worrying about the destination misses the point – the destination is God's part – our part is to be faithful in the journey, to learn to find joy in journeying together.

I'm sure that Paul's nephew and Albert McMakin led less than perfect lives. But in this way they showed us what it means to live as faithful followers of Jesus: **they listened and acted faithfully on what God put in front of them to do.**

May all of us be anonymous to history, but known to God as women and men who lived faithful lives.