

To the Ends of the Earth

(Acts 28:11-31)

INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you've started reading a book, and because you just need to know what happens at the end, you've jumped to the end....read the final page...read the end of the story.

Well, today we get to the end of the book of Acts...and we might expect to find out what happens "at the end...."

What will happen to the Gospel, and the early church?

What's going to happen to the Apostle Paul?

We've been following him, as he's been travelling from Jerusalem – under arrest and under guard by the Roman authorities.

And this travel continues in Acts 28, where we read about the journey, the introduction, and the ministry as Paul heads to Rome.

POINT 1 – The journey (as preparation), vv.11-15

Our passage today, from verse 11 begins with Paul's final journey. And it's a journey that essentially prepares Paul for what he'll encounter when he arrives in Rome.

We're given details in these opening verses 11 through 14.

A bit like an itinerary from a tour that we might sign up to for holidays.

I don't know about you, but whenever I read this sort of thing, I look for a map from that time-period which shows the journey.

And if you do that, you'll see that this journey takes Paul from the small island of Malta to the larger island of present-day Sicily (that's Syracuse in verse 12). Then to Rhegium which was a coastal Greek colony on the toe of Italy; on to Puteoli (in modern-day Naples further up the west coast of Italy, before finally arriving in Rome.

Note what Paul encounters on this journey at Puteoli. Verse 14: 'brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them.'

Brothers and sisters; that is: other believers!

Now Paul had never visited these places on his previous missionary trips. Meaning that despite this, the Gospel of Jesus had spread in other ways and means.

And it was bearing fruit in those who heard and believed: their generous invitation of hospitality.

It's a similar scene that greets Paul when he completes this journey and arrives in Rome.

Verse 15:

'The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us.'

That's a good couple of days walk that these different groups of Christian brothers and sisters travel to meet Paul.

And note the impact this has on Paul, and why it's important preparation for him, given what unfolds initially during his time in Rome.

Paul sees these people there to meet him, he thanks God and is encouraged, as verse 15 continues.

Paul is encouraged by the greeting party that meets him: fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who have been so transformed by the Gospel of Jesus, that they're prepared to commit several days travel on a return trip to Rome just to meet him!

They may not have known what Paul would encounter in the days and weeks ahead; Paul may not have known.

But God certainly knew, and sovereignly enables this encounter and fellowship to encourage Paul, to prepare him for what's to come.

And Paul thanks God for it.

When we attend church, and church events...diocesan events: there's great encouragement. Personal encouragement: yes; but also, there's the encouragement to others, from me being there!

The point being, that it's not simply about how I feel!

We may not always feel like going along, but somehow God uses our presence to encourage others, just as we're encouraged by their presence!

Paul is encouraged; Paul is prepared...as his journey to Rome concludes.

POINT 2 – The introduction (as illustration), vv.16-28

And so Paul finally arrives in Rome, and in the next dozen or so verses we read about his introduction: firstly to the Jewish leaders, and then to a larger crowd of Jews.

Now, there's a lot going on in these verses, which describe this introductory ministry for Paul.

But today I want to focus on three aspects of this. Because these accounts of this ministry serve as a helpful illustration for us, as to what to expect from our own Gospel ministry.

Firstly, he speaks into their context.

That is, he uses language and concepts that they'll understand.

Like a science teacher who adapts their teaching notes, depending on whether they're teaching year 8, or year 12.

They'll use language and concepts that each age-group will understand.

Speaking into their context.

See Paul do this there in verse 23:

²³...He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus.

The people Paul is ministering to are Jews who therefore knew about the Old Testament law given to Moses, knew about the prophets.

Paul uses their knowledge and understanding – their context – to show them, to persuade them: ‘about Jesus.’

Paul explaining how the law and the prophets all point to, promise about, and are fulfilled perfectly, in Jesus...speaking into their context.

Secondly, there’s a mixed response.

Verse 24:

²⁴ Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.

Some are convinced...convinced...that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one whom the law and the prophets all call for and point to.

And, sadly, *others don’t believe*. Others, don’t believe what Paul is trying to persuade them about regarding Jesus and His identity.

A mixed response: some believe, some don’t.

Thirdly, through all this: Paul doesn’t give up hope.

Paul knows that his message – the Gospel message – is going to upset people. It’s the reason he finds himself in Rome...’arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans’ (verse 17)...*a soldier guarding him (verse 16)...bound with chains (verse 20).*

He knows this message has - and will continue - to upset people, including his Jewish listeners to whom he’s initially speaking to here in this introductory ministry.

But he doesn’t give up hope.

Instead, as we read in verse 20: he’s asked for this audience!

And, following the mixed response and disagreements among his Jewish audience, he goes again to the Scriptures, and tells them what they need to hear!

He doesn’t compromise.

He doesn’t back down.

He doesn’t lose hope.

And actually, he holds out what he calls the ‘hope of Israel’ (verse 20).

He holds out: Jesus, to these people who desperately need to know who Jesus is and what He has done for them.

In verses 26 and 27 is this excerpt from Isaiah 6, where the prophet Isaiah and the nation of Israel were warned by God hundreds of years earlier.

They're warned that their disbelief and rejection of God – their *calloused hearts, unhearing ears and closed eyes* – will result in judgement.

Judgement that Paul doesn't want for these people....His people! Paul too was once a hard-hearted Jew, before God miraculously and graciously apprehended him on the road to Damascus and gave Him belief, and the certain hope of life eternal with Jesus.

This is the hope Paul holds out for his audience: that they too would *see, hear, understand, and in turn be healed by God* (verse 27).

Paul's introductory ministry in Rome, serves as an illustration for ministry, for us today.

We too, need to ensure we speak into people's context.

Which means we need to know people's context, we need to know people.

Clergy: spend time with your people so you know them and can helpfully speak and explain God's Words to them.

Brothers and sisters: get to know the people you live and work and study with....so you can helpfully speak and explain God's Words to them.

And: we – like Paul – can expect a mixed response.

When we go into the world and tell people about Jesus:

Some people will believe: praise God!

Others, won't.

Or they'll need more convincing....more time...more careful, patient, gentle explanation.

And there'll always be others, who need to hear the good news of Jesus.

Meaning we – like Paul – shouldn't give up hope, but continue to hold out hope...the precious, life-giving hope of Jesus: his life, death, resurrection and ascension...now reigning over all, and one day to return and fulfil God's promise of perfect, abundant life in His presence.

So, we continue this faithful ministry in the world...lives and words that reflect Jesus.

Fuelled by prayer – much prayer – confirming our reliance on God for this important, difficult, obedient ministry that God has called us all to.

Because remember: it is God's Work! We've seen this all through these series' in Acts, haven't we...?

So we can take great heart and guidance from this illustration of Gospel ministry in this final chapter of Acts.

POINT 3 – The ministry (as continuation), vv.30-31

³⁰ For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Our passage concludes, the book of Acts concludes.

It's a simple yet profound summary of what we have as the final narrative regarding the Apostle Paul's ministry.

It's profound, because it's so fitting, for what's been described in this two-volume account of the Gospel of Jesus, provided by Dr. Luke.

This ministry of Paul, as He continues to faithfully serve God in Rome is many things:

It's relentless: two years of welcoming people into his house and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus.

It's repetitive: we read that he 'welcomed all who came to see him.'

I read that and picture a revolving door into that rented house: as person after person, Jew and Gentile, come to see Paul, who welcomes them and talks to them about Jesus....repeat....repeat...

This continued ministry is also required: people need to hear what Paul is proclaiming!

And finally: this ministry of Paul, is readied.

I was struggling for another 'R' there, to continue the alliteration.

It's readied, meaning it's enabled, by God!

That's the only way Paul would be able to do this ministry: 'with all boldness and without hindrance.'

Still under house arrest, uncomfortably guarded by a Roman soldier, the encouragements and discouragements that always come when ministering to people...yet by the enabling of God, Paul continues this proclamation ministry.

Meaning Paul remains faithful to the task he was commissioned for by Jesus...we saw that back in Acts 9.

CLOSE

We're at the end of the book of Acts, but this isn't the end of the story.

We're not told in our Bibles what happens to Paul after this...there's much speculation, but it's not really important.

What's important, is that the work continues....God's work continues....as the Gospel continues to be proclaimed to, and through the church.

He's tasked us for this work.

He's tasked us to – like Paul – 'proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ-with all boldness and without hindrance.'

Here in our diocese, we call this: *sharing Jesus for life*.

It's hard work, its often discouraging work.

We have a unique context to speak into out here in the central west...ageing population: especially in our churches; people struggling on the land; families absent from church; an increasingly secular society.

But we have hope: the good news of Jesus, a power which can and does save.

Some will accept this news, others will reject.

And we press on. It's required – people need to hear it. So we press on relentlessly, repetitively, readied by God.

We do that through faithful, Bible-based teaching in our Parishes; gospel-focused, community-minded activities and relationships that point people to Jesus and provide opportunities to share Jesus; we live lives and share lives that reflect *Jesus...for life*.

May you, may all of us, continue this life-imperative ministry, under God...for God, with the help of God, for His honour and glory.