



Sixth in a six-part scriptural exploration of Presbytery Leadership

New Testament Lesson **Acts 26:24-32 from “The Message”**

“It’s because of this ‘whole world’ dimension that the Jews grabbed me in the Temple that day and tried to kill me. They want to keep God for themselves. But God has stood by me, just as he promised, and I’m standing here saying what I’ve been saying to anyone, whether king or child, who will listen. And everything I’m saying is completely in line with what the prophets and Moses said would happen: One, the Messiah must die; two, raised from the dead, he would be the first rays of God’s daylight shining on people far and near, people both godless and God-fearing.”

That was too much for Festus. He interrupted with a shout: “Paul, you’re crazy! You’ve read too many books, spent too much time staring off into space! Get a grip on yourself, get back in the real world!”

But Paul stood his ground. “With all respect, Festus, Your Honor, I’m not crazy. I’m both accurate and sane in what I’m saying. The king knows what I’m talking about. I’m sure that nothing of what I’ve said sounds crazy to him. He’s known all about it for a long time. You must realize that this wasn’t done behind the scenes. You believe the prophets, don’t you, King Agrippa? Don’t answer that—I know you believe.”

But Agrippa did answer: “Keep this up much longer and you’ll make a Christian out of me!”

Paul, still in chains, said, “That’s what I’m praying for, whether now or later, and not only you but everyone listening today, to become like me—except, of course, for this prison jewelry!” The king and the governor, along with Bernice and their advisors, got up and went into the next room to talk over what they had heard. They quickly agreed on Paul’s innocence, saying, “There’s nothing in this man deserving prison, let alone death.”

Agrippa told Festus, “He could be set free right now if he hadn’t requested the hearing before Caesar.”

Here we have Paul almost on his way to Rome. King Agrippa and his wife Bernice have come to town to welcome Festus, the new governor. One has the sense that Paul’s appearance here is more a source of entertainment, but Paul takes the opportunity to explain the source of his faith and his calling to witness to the Gentile world. Paul takes the opportunity to speak to power. Luke takes the opportunity here to frame the Christian faith in a way that appeals to the Gentile audience and to assure those in power of the faith’s relative safety in spite of Christianity’s tension with Judaism. We must remember that many of the Jewish opponents of Paul were in fact Jewish Christians that disagreed with him about sabbath observances, circumcision, kosher dietary restrictions, and crucially, Paul’s position on the incarnation. By this time the fractures across the

Church between the various opinions about Jewish observances had become so strained that this church fight had escalated to a stage five conflict. Paul's life is in danger. He faces sure death to return to Jerusalem. And probably death going on to Rome. But he has a mission to present the faith before the emperor.

Part of our role as Presbytery leaders is to be that interaction point between the empire and the church, thus we are engaged in lawsuits to protect the church and its witness. If someone sues one of our churches, we are there. Not that long ago the Episcopalians were engaged in a case with several congregations who had renounced the Episcopal Church of North America and self-affiliated with Nigeria. They seized the church property, turned out the faithful Episcopalians and sought legal advantage. I signed on as an amicus, or friend of the true Episcopal Church and their case to retain the property. I was engaged with the Virginia State legislature at the attempt of one of the members of a dissident church to rewrite Virginia law to allow this to happen. We are called to mix it up with the Empire. Our Presbytery championed a change in the Virginia law to allow Churches to be incorporated. National Capital Presbytery is currently considering a First Amendment suit against US Immigration Services related to a First Amendment violation. Our role as Presbytery leader is to be the face of Presbyterian Christianity to the culture. It is to seek out the press with our message and offer a deeper understanding of the issues at play. It is to contest the simple-minded proclivity of some journalists to settle for the stupidity that parades as Christian Witness by the likes of Pat Robertson, Paula White, Robert Jeffress, Franklin Graham and others of limited theological capacity.

Our witness compels us to stand against racism, for immigration rights, against for-profit prisons, for adequate gun safety legislation. Our role as Presbytery leaders includes interface with the Empire, advocating for those without lobbying money or presence. We advocate for the cause of peace, reconciliation and justice in the face of operative idolatries which worship guns, whiteness, and wealth.

And we can be aware that, like Paul, there is a price to be paid for opposing the Empire's xenophobia, its Fundamentalism, its operative white supremacy, its complicity in the commodification of human beings and the resulting dehumanization.

Paul is in essence saying "We Christians have value. We have a mission, we are more than a passing curiosity. Empire, this is what life is all about: justice, peace, reconciliation, compassion. And Empire, we are not feeling that from you!"

Woe be to us if we do not preach the gospel. Yet also woe to us because we preach the gospel.

G. Wilson Gunn, Jr
General Presbyter