Speaking to the King
Acts 26:1-29

Last week we looked at the call, the cost and the purpose of God in evangelism. Today we're going to see how Paul speaks to those in power. I've got three points: the problem of power; speaking truth to power and the power we need.

The Problem of Power

Now for those of you who don't know, the City of London boasts a number of ancient trade guilds, called Livery Companies, that date back over 500 years. There are the Mercers, and the Grocers, and the Fishmongers and the Goldsmiths and the Salters and the Ironmongers and so on. But really they function now as charities where the good and the great of the City raise money for various charitable causes.

Well, last year I was invited to give the address at the annual Thanksgiving Service in the City for the Worshipful Company of Dyers. Which was quite an experience. And the service began as the Officers of the Company processed from their headquarters just down the road from the Bank of England, to the church, with them wearing all their long fur gowns, and floppy hats, and great gold chains of office. And the procession was led by the Bargemaster, carrying a silver wand, and wearing this incredibly ornate black gold trimmed jacket, with a shield on his arm, and red breeches, and then there was me carrying my Bible, feeling very out of place, walking through the streets of London.

And the procession took us to one of these beautiful old London churches. And when we arrived, I was shown the pulpit where I was supposed to preach from, and it's about 10 feet up in the air. And I looked at it and reckoned I'd probably get altitude sickness if I used it, and so I asked if they wouldn't mind if I preached from down here. And I sat there waiting for the service to start, as all these leaders in education and medicine and industry and the armed forces arrived and took their place. And there's me sitting there getting more and more nervous and thinking, 'O my! What am I doing here?'

And then the service began, and the choir was simply extraordinary, and the music was incredible. And I'm sat there, looking at the order of service, realising that my time to preach was getting closer and closer. And my hands were getting sweaty. And then just before I was to get up and preach, the choir sang Handel's *Zadok the Priest*, which if you know it, is this phenomenal piece sang at the Queen's coronation. And then it's going to be me preaching, and as the music swelled louder and louder, I was feeling smaller and smaller. And as I sat there listening to the choir, I noticed this banging on the back of the pew behind me. So I turned around to see why someone would be hitting the back of the pew, only I realised it wasn't anyone hitting it, it was my heart, beating so hard, my back was banging on the pew.

Honestly, I don't think I have ever been so nervous. It was the sheer fear of speaking to so many influential people. And I was looking at my notes thinking, 'can I *really* say what I'm about to say?'

But power, or at least those who have power and authority and influence can have that effect, can't they? Power has the ability to intimidate you. It has the

power to silence you when you should speak out. It has the power to make you compromise on things you shouldn't.

And that can happen because we want to stay on the right side of those with the power. Maybe your career depends on the favour of your boss. Maybe how you appear to others depends on what this person over you thinks of you, and they have the power of influence. And so when it comes to matters of justice, or integrity, or righteousness in the work place, we can be tempted to stay quiet, because we want to stay on the right side of those in power, when really we should speak out. And for us who are Christians, as we saw last week, there is this call on all of our lives to spread the good news of Jesus. And that includes to those in positions of power and influence in our lives. But we can be reticent to do it, precisely because we don't want to offend or upset those who are over us.

So, there is this need to speak truth to power, and yet often we can find that our lips are sealed.

Which brings us to this passage. Because this is exactly the setting Paul finds himself in. Luke tells us in 25:23, 'On the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city.' So you've got this gathering of all these powerful and influential people: Festus the Roman governor, civic and military leaders from the nation, and Agrippa, the Jewish king. And they all process in, in all their finery, with great pomp, Luke says. And of course, when it comes to King Agrippa, he was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who had beheaded John the Baptist, and interrogated Jesus at his trial. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who had ordered the massacre of the Innocents in an attempt to eliminate Jesus when he was just born.

And Paul stands before all these bigwigs, all these powerful people, before King Agrippa from the Herodian dynasty, and he has to defend himself. And yet the remarkable thing is that Paul does *not* defend himself. He does not try and win their approval. He is not paralysed by fear, or silenced by their power. He does not bend his message to try and flatter them, and he does not try and ingratiate himself to them. Rather, Paul sees behind all their grandiosity, to the individuals underneath, and, crucially, to what they really needed to hear.

Speaking Truth to Power

Now, just think what Paul is trying to do in his address here. He's given the opportunity to speak for himself. And yet he doesn't use it to try and gain his freedom. He uses it to tell those in power the gospel. Verse 22: 'To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great.' So very deliberately Paul uses his trial, not to win their approval but to win them, *the great*, to Christ. His aim is not to see himself freed, but to see them saved.

And Agrippa realises that that is what Paul is doing. Once Paul has been interrupted by Festus, Agrippa asks Paul, v28, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?", because that's what you're trying to do isn't it

Paul! And Paul says that's exactly what he's trying to do: v29, 'And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that *not only you but also all who hear me this day* might become such as I am – except for these chains." I don't want you to be prisoners, but you are absolutely right Agrippa, I do want all of you to become Christians!

So this is not self-preservation on Paul's part; he puts his own interests second to their need to hear the truth.

And just look how Paul does it. He both draws Agrippa in and he pushes him away. He appeals to Agrippa, but he also challenges him. It's the push and pull of the gospel. Several times he goes out of his way to stress the common ground between him and Agrippa and the gospel: they are both Jews, the promise of God was made to '*our* fathers' (v6), it's the promise 'to which *our* twelve tribes hope to attain' (v7); that Christ proclaims light 'to *our* people' (v23).

And yet as well as drawing Agrippa in, he also pushes back on him, he challenges him: verse 8, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" Verse 27, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."

So whilst Paul works to find and show the common ground between them, he is also prepared to challenge, and get past their defences, so that the truth can penetrate their hearts.

But listen, to speak like that to power, you need courage. But not just courage; you also need humility. Because the danger is that in our desire to challenge power, or to point out injustice or failures of integrity, or bad practice in the work place, and perhaps above all, in our desire to share the gospel with those in positions of authority or influence, we can come across as self-righteous. It can seem as if everything would be ok if you just thought like me, if you were as good, or as moral as me. That you're the one who's wrong and I'm the one who's right. And then of course it seems as if *you* are the answer and that this is all really about people having to match your standards.

So to speak to power, it's not just about being courageous, it's also about doing it in a way that doesn't reveal you to be a jerk. You've got to be able to do it in a way that persuades, rather than repels, that doesn't come out of some kind of superior self-righteousness.

So if you're to speak to power, you need a power at work in your own life that on the one hand emboldens you, but at the same time humbles you. A power that tells you deep down that you are not the answer, but that gives you the courage to declare what the answer is.

And Paul had that. The question is, where did he get it?

The Power You need
And, of course, what gave Paul the courage to appeal to and confront power, and the humility to point away from himself, was the very message he was proclaiming. It was the good news of Jesus, the gospel, at work in his own life that gave him both the courage and the humility to speak truth to power.

And the gospel has that power for three reasons.

Firstly, it's biblical.
You see, no less than three times Paul makes the point to Agrippa that the life and death and resurrection of Christ was the ultimate fulfilment of the writings of the Old Testament prophets; that this wasn't something Paul or anyone else had made up, but was deeply rooted in the Bible. Verse 9: 'I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers'; v22: 'I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass.' Verse 27, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

Now, why can knowing that the good news is biblical and rooted in the Old Testament give you both courage and humility? Because you know that for all these promises and prophecies to be fulfilled in the life of Christ, this is not something that someone has dreamed up. This is not some passing philosophical fancy. The gospel is God's word, God's answer, foretold centuries before, to a lost and needy world. And when you know it's God's word, that the gospel is his gospel, then you have confidence and courage in the message.

But secondly, knowing the gospel is rooted in Scripture humbles you. You see the problem with much religion is that rather than us being made in God's image, we make God in our own image. We make God to be the way we want him to be. We force our own preconceived ideas upon him. As Feuerbach, the 19th century German philosopher, wrote, religion can be nothing more than the blown up image of the self, thrown up against the sky.

And it's exactly that tendency that Paul challenges here when he says, v8, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" Why indeed? Unless, of course, we have reduced God to be like us, and have made God in our image.

And when you do that it makes you proud. Because now 'God' approves of everything you like, and he condemns everything and everyone you don't like. And now with 'God' on your side you can look down on anyone who disagrees with you. You have taken the self-appointed moral high-ground.

But when you know that the message of what God has done for us in Christ is not of your own making, that this is rooted in the Scriptures, that there is an authority outside yourself, then it humbles you. Because you realise that you are not the answer, but rather have been part of the problem; that the gospel is *for* you personally, not from you, and that you need it's message of salvation just as much as anyone else.

So, a gospel that's biblical will make you courageous because you have confidence in the message, but it will also make you humble because it's from an authority outside yourself.

But the second reason the gospel can give you the courage and the humility to speak truth to power is that it's true.

Look what Luke writes in v24, 'As [Paul] was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind." In other words, 'Paul, you must be mad to believe this stuff about Jesus rising from the dead, stark, staring mad!'

But look how Paul responds: v25, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words." So Paul feels no need to respond in kind, does he? Festus has just called him mad, but Paul calls him 'most excellent Festus' in return.

How can he be so calm, and have such poise and dignity in the face of insults? Because he knows that the gospel is true, so it doesn't matter to him if people in power mock him. As we saw last week, for Paul, Festus mocking him would be like a man, blind from birth, mocking someone who could see for describing the beauty of a sunset: 'don't be daft, you're mad, there can't be anything as beautiful as this sunset your describing, you've been reading too many books!' The fact that Festus can't see it and mocks it, doesn't mean it's not true.

But how does Paul know the gospel's true? Because of what he says next to Agrippa. Verse 25-6: "I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner."

Festus might be an outsider and a newcomer to the scene, but King Agrippa most certainly isn't. His family had been intimately tied up with the birth, the life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth. The stories about Jesus weren't fables Paul had cooked up in a deranged mind, and Paul knows that Agrippa knows it. Agrippa knew about Jesus – his grandfather had tried to kill him as a baby; his father had interrogated him at his trial. And Agrippa knows what's been going on. He'll have heard all the stories of the miracles Jesus had done. The nation was abuzz with them. There were the 500 or more witnesses to Christ's resurrection, and these people could be called as witnesses. This wasn't done in the shadows, this wasn't done in a corner, Paul says. And Agrippa knows it. And it's interesting isn't it, that Agrippa doesn't say that Paul is bonkers, like Festus did, he just says he doesn't want to become a Christian. The facts were there, and Paul and Agrippa know it; if only Agrippa and the others, and maybe even you, if you're not yet a Christian, would examine them.

And it's the truth of Christ's resurrection that gives Paul the courage to speak truth to power. And it's knowing, deep inside, that Jesus died, but rose again, that can give you courage to speak up for justice and mercy and integrity in the work

place, against the self-interest of the powerful. It's knowing that Christ really has risen from the dead that can give you the humble boldness to speak up for him on campus. Because you know that if Christ has risen from the dead, no-one can do anything to you to ultimately harm you, not even the powerful.

And if Christ has risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God, where he now rules, then he's the King, the only king whose opinion really matters. So you don't need to worry about what those in power think of you. Because it matters more to you what King Jesus says of you, than a king Agrippa.

But thirdly, the gospel can give you the humility and the courage you need to speak truth to power because it's life transforming.

In his address here Paul sets out what he used to be like. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He opposed the name of Jesus. He arrested and persecuted the Christians, he was consumed by a raging fury against them. And yet here he now is, proclaiming the very message of Jesus that he had tried to destroy. How come? Because he had encountered Christ. And that encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus had totally transformed him.

You see, Paul discovered that he had been so wrong. In all his religious zeal, in all his self-righteous indignation, he had missed the very thing that God was doing. As Paul lay on the road, confronted by the glory of Christ, it sunk in just how wrong, how sinful, he really was.

But if to Paul's horror he discovered that he was more sinful than he could ever know, he also discovered that he was more loved than he could ever dream of. He speaks of how Jesus commissioned him to go and spread the message that all, v18, might 'receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me'. And how does that come about? Because of what the prophets always said would happen, v23, 'that the Christ must suffer.'

And when you know that though you are sinful, and undeserving of his mercy, Christ suffered and died for you, then it deeply humbles you. Because you know, as Paul discovered on the road, that you are not better, you are not more righteous than anyone else. So it kills the jerk in you.

But as his undeserved love for you sinks in, it also emboldens you and gives you courage. You see, the gospel is life-transforming because it tells you that fear doesn't need to rule you – not even the fear of the powerful. The approval of others doesn't need to dominate you, because you know what God thinks of you. You know that though you are nothing, the One who has everything, the One with the real power, the ultimate authority, laid it all aside, and suffered and died for you, to bring you to himself. And when you know that, you can never be the same again.

And so knowing the good news is biblical, knowing it's true, and experiencing its life transforming power in your life, can give you the courage and humility you need to speak up for truth, and for Christ, when power would try to silence you.