Now, I don't think any of us like to think that we are being manipulated, or that we're just pawns in someone else's game. There are few things worse than feeling like you're being used, are there. And yet, in many ways, that was the situation the apostle Paul found himself in.

If you remember last week we left him a prisoner in Caesarea. And two years passed in jail whilst Felix, the Roman governor, for his own political and financial gain, tried to play Paul off the Jewish leadership. But when Felix was recalled to Rome he was replaced by another governor, Festus.

And to do the Jew a favour, Festus suggested moving Paul's trial back to Jerusalem. But instead, Paul appealed to Caesar, which would be like taking your case to the Supreme Court. But that put Festus in a hole, because if Festus was to send Paul to Rome, he needs to be clear why Paul is in trouble in the first place. So he calls Agrippa, the Jewish King, and his wife Bernice, to help him and to hear Paul's story from his own lips.

And as we're going to see, what Paul tells them is remarkable. And it's remarkable because he tells his story of how this man, who once tried to destroy the Christian faith, now preached it, and was prepared to suffer for it, and what motivated him to do it. And whilst Paul's story is unique for Paul, we're going to see why it also matters for us, whether you're a Christian or not.

Acts 26:1-23

We're going to spend a couple of weeks on this passage. Next week we're going to see how Paul shares the gospel with people in power. Today we're going to look at what Jesus says to Paul – because he tells him that he's appointed him as a witness, that he will deliver him, and that he is sending him to open people's eyes. So we're going to look at The Call, The Cost and finally at the Purpose of God in Evangelism

The Call

Now Paul begins by reminding them of his past life, but the real centre of his talk is his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, because it was meeting with Christ that totally turned Paul's life around. And yet, Paul's emphasis here is not so much on his conversion as on his commissioning. Paul is confronted by this blazing light from heaven and Jesus' voice speaking to him, he's thrown to the ground and then Jesus says to him, v16: "Rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you."

Now perhaps one of the most significant things about modern news media is the power it gives to people on the ground at the time of an event. Something happens, like the events in Paris or Brussels, and within minutes we have people posting videos or tweeting about what's happening. And the news organisations are asking people who are directly affected to get in touch with them. It's the power of the first hand, on the ground, eye-witness.

And that was the calling on Paul's life: to be a witness to everything he had and would experience of Christ. Now, it's obvious, isn't it, that this event on the road to Damascus was unique for Paul. And yet there's a sense in which the calling on Paul's life to be a witness is something Jesus calls every Christian to: to bear witness to what we have experienced of Christ.

Now this week in my daily Bible reading I was in Ephesians 6, which is that famous passage about the armour of God. And it's a great passage whenever you read it, but it's especially great when you're feeling like you're in a bit of battle. But this week one verse stood out. That amongst the armour of the belt of truth, and the breastplate of righteousness, and the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, are the sandals, the shoes of the gospel: Eph 6:15, 'and as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.' And it struck me again that it's not just the shoes of the gospel of peace, but the shoes of *the readiness* of the gospel of peace. A readiness to share, and to spread the gospel of peace. A readiness that wasn't just for Paul but for all of us.

You see, when Jesus commissioned the disciples after his resurrection he said to them, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). So, get this, at the very heart of Christianity, is the message that God is a missionary God. He is a sending God, a God who sends his Son into the world. But just as Jesus was sent, so he then sends his disciples into the world: Matt 28:19 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.'

Now I don't know who first coined this phrase, but it stuck. The Old Testament faith, with the Temple at its centre was Come and See: come and see a nation with God at its centre. And the danger is we can translate that kind of mindset into our own mission, people must come to us. But the New Testament faith is very different, and these first century Christians were very different. This wasn't Come and See; following Jesus, it was Go and Tell. And that call to go into the world and tell all that we have experienced of Christ is the call on every Christian's life.

Look at what Jesus says to Paul as Paul cowers there on the road: 'Rise and stand upon your feet… I am sending you' (26:16-17). Paul is not to stay there crumpled or squirming in fear, he's to get up and join in God's work of spreading the good news that's for all. And the call upon our lives is not to just sit here feeling unworthy, or inadequate, or fearful, but to rise and stand up and go and tell.

But, if you're anything like me, you hear something like that and your blood runs cold! In the homegroup study of 1 Thessalonians this week, or next if you're not there yet, we looked at some of the reasons why we feel reluctant or intimidated to tell others about Jesus, when Paul was bold. And there are ample reasons, aren't there? Personal embarrassment, feeling like you don't have the answers, not wanting to impose, and so on. So how are you and I supposed to do it?

Well, firstly, it's a simple matter of obedience, isn't it? Paul recounts how Jesus said to him, v14, 'it is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And a

goad was a sharp stick that was used to prod oxen in the right direction, but if the ox kept wanting to go its own way, it got even more prods and pokes with the stick. And apparently, this was a well-known proverb that you just bring more trouble on yourself if you try and fight God's will for your life. In other words, Jesus said to Paul, 'Paul, you need to stop fighting me. You will only be truly happy if you fall into step with me.' And the truth is that true joy and fulfilment in the Christian life only comes as we obey Christ. If we don't, we're just going to be miserable Christians. Which is why Paul said to King Agrippa, v19, 'Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.' Because you wouldn't want to be, would you?

But secondly, alongside that willingness to obey Jesus is the realisation that whilst we are, and feel, totally inadequate for the job, God gives us everything we need to do it. Listen to what Paul says in v22: 'To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying.' So God does not say, 'here is what I want you to do, and now let me sit back and watch you mess up and fail miserably.' No, there is the promise of help, that words will be given us, that insight will come, that the Spirit comes into our lives as he did at the first Pentecost, to equip us to be witnesses.

But thirdly, we've got to step out, to go and tell. So how can we do that?

Well, whilst Jesus may call some of you to go to some foreign mission field, the truth is he has already called all of us to the mission field here, at home. Every day as you get up you start a new day of mission, wherever God has

placed you, to witness to all that we have experienced of Jesus, at school, on campus, at work, with friends and neighbours.

And that's not going to be going out there and desperately trying to tell someone the 4 Spiritual Laws so you can feel like a good Christian. Maybe it will begin by simply letting your friend or work colleague know that you went to church at the weekend. 'What you? But you're normal aren't you?' And you don't push it, because you don't need to push it, because this is not about you feeling good about yourself because you got the gospel in, you're just letting them know that normal, reasonable, intelligent people like you are Christians.

Or you've got a friend, and she's got this problem, maybe with her marriage, and you just listen to her talk – like a friend does. And at the end you tell her you'll pray for her. And you don't have to get all weird and do it there and then necessarily, and you don't need to try and preach a sermon to her about marriage, you're just being a good friend to her, and listening, and praying.

Or as you've got to know the guy in your office better, you might just ask him about his own beliefs, and *amazingly*, you don't say anything in response. You just listen, because you're genuinely interested to know where he's coming from, and you don't have this need to prove yourself right and him wrong, because that's not where your security lies. But with time, as his trust in you grows, you get to share something of what you believe. And you can do that graciously, and without embarrassment,

because your confidence doesn't come from what he thinks of you but knowing what Christ thinks of you.

And all of that can happen before engaging them in a longer discussion or asking them questions about what the biggest barrier to faith for them is, or sharing a decent Christian book with them, or getting them together with some of your Christian friends for a meal, or explaining the gospel to them.

But it begins by this open hearted willingness, and this trusting Jesus to equip us, and this sensitivity to the Spirit, that knows when to speak and when to shut up.

But the truth is that however sensitive we are, and however much we are motivated by love rather than anything else, the good news of Jesus can be heard as bad news by some, and so as Paul discovered, there may just be a price to pay.

The Cost

This week Lydia, one of my daughters, and her friends at their school Christian Union group, had a visit from one of the deputy headmasters. They had baked over a 1000 Christmas cookies, and packaged them all up in nice little bags, and on the last day of term before the Christmas holidays they had stood and handed out these little gifts to all the students at their Gymnase just to bless them.

And the deputy head, who is a good man, came to their meeting on Wednesday to tell them there had been a complaint from some of the other teachers. You see my daughter and her friends had committed the terrible crime of writing a Bible verse on the some of the little tags on the cookies. And it wasn't a problem to give out biscuits, and it wasn't a problem to put tags on them, the problem was you can't put a Bible verse on it (at Christmas!), and it mustn't happen again.

Now, just ask yourself, do you think there would have been any complaint if they had included a quote by Voltaire, or Gandhi, or Richard Dawkins? Probably not. But that is the society that we live, where tolerance reigns, provided you don't challenge its pluralistic world view. But of course, just as it did in Paul's day, the gospel does challenge it, as it challenges all of us.

And it's because of that challenge that Paul's life was in danger, and why he was on trial. But it's also why he remembers Jesus promising him, in v17, to rescue and deliver him from Jew and Gentile alike.

You see, the remarkable thing is that God even turns opposition for good. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 21:13. He's told them that they will be persecuted, and put on trial for his name's sake, but then he says, and "this will be your opportunity to bear witness." So the very opposition that we face, like Lydia at school, as we respond to it with love and grace and boldness and more of the gospel, can become a means to further witness to Jesus.

Which is why we shouldn't be fazed by the times we live in. You see, if Jesus' promise to Paul is *not* immunity from suffering, it *is* a promise that nothing can stand in the way of God's purpose to see the good news of Jesus spread. And that's why Paul could write from his final prison, that though he was suffering for the gospel, 'bound with chains as a criminal…. the word of God is not bound' (2 Tim 2:9). I might be chained, but God's word is never chained.

So that's the call, and that's the cost, but Paul also tells Agrippa that right from the start Jesus made it clear what God was doing through the gospel.

The Purpose

Look what Jesus says to Paul in v17-18: "I am sending you to open their eyes [that's Jews and Gentiles], so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Now regardless of how reluctant you might feel at the thought of being a witness to Christ, hearing what Jesus intends to accomplish through you should give you a certain humble boldness and courage and, frankly, excitement. A boldness in your praying, a boldness in the way we live, and a humble boldness in the way you talk. Because this is what God wants to see happening in our schools and campuses, for our friends or colleagues.

Let's just briefly look at each one:

The first thing Jesus says is 'I am sending you to open their eyes.' Now from our balcony we get to see some stunning sunsets over the lake and the Jura. And the colours are breathtaking. But imagine trying to describe the beauty you're seeing to a person who has been blind from birth. Where would you even begin? But imagine if that person could suddenly see, and for the first time in their life saw the reds and the oranges and the blues, and the way the mountains were dark and the lake lit up, and the sky aflame. And Jesus is saying, 'there is a world out there that's been blinded to the beauty of God'. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 'the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.' (2 Cor 4:4). But Jesus says, 'I am sending you to go and open their eyes, to see the truth.' And if you're a Christian you know what Jesus is talking about here. In the words of John Newton's famous hymn Amazing Grace: 'I once was blind but now I see.'

But, of course, you and I have zero power to do that, do we? We can't get someone to see spiritually and intellectually what they can't see about God now. But the Spirit of God can. And Christ's call to us is to be a co-worker with him as he does it.

But the second thing Jesus says to Paul is why he wants eyes to be opened: v18, 'so that they might turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.'

Now just notice how Jesus puts that. It's not from the power of Satan to the *power* of God, but from the power of Satan to God. From a dehumanising,

crushing power that keeps people in darkness, a power that reduces people to a number, like the man who when Jesus asked his name replied Legion, a thousand, a number, to a relationship with the God who loves you as am individual, who wants you to see, to walk in the light.

This week I read the book The Giver and without giving too much away it's about a boy who can see what the rest of his community cannot see, that the life of the community is built on deceit, and not seeing, but when you can see, life can never be the same again. And the power of Satan in our lives works on that same darkness, on deception. It's the false promises of idols, that tell you you're having the time of your life; that this is the thing that life is all about, when it's all a lie. And Jesus sends us, his people, out into the world to be witnesses that there is light, that there is colour, that there are sunsets. That this darkness of life that you think is normal is not normal. There is something far, far better in him.

And it's the power of the Gospel, through God's Spirit, that breaks those lies of Satan. The truth that God loves you enough that Christ would die for you breaks the lie that you are worthless and insignificant. The truth of the resurrection breaks the lie that this life is all there is, so eat drink and be merry. The truth of full and free forgiveness in Christ, breaks the lie that you are too far gone.

Because that's the third and final thing Jesus says he will accomplish through the good news: v18 again, 'that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' And that is the

gift of the gospel, the gift of God's grace to those who will turn to Jesus, that's open to all of us: forgiveness of sins and the burden of guilt lifted. All those things we shouldn't have done, but did. All those things we should have done, but didn't. Everything in our past or present or future that could condemn us – all forgiven because Jesus took it all upon himself.

And as a result, we can find a place to belong, among God's people: fellow citizens in the kingdom of God.

And that's what Christ wants to accomplish through the witness of your life and your words, however faltering and timid. That's what he wants for you if you're not yet a Christian: that he might open your eyes to the truth, that you might come out of the shadows, and into the light, that you might know the goodness of deep forgiveness, and come and find your place among the people of God.