

THE GLOBAL CHURCH

(Acts 28.11-16 and Matthew 28.16-20)

The road to Rome: In 1977 I skipped off my final City and Guild exams (electronic engineering...) to take a 3 day train journey across Europe to Rome along with 20,000 other people to see Liverpool FC play in the European Cup final (as it was then) at the Olympic Stadium in Rome against the German champions Borussia Monchengladbach (in those days only the national champions could play in the competition).

As history shows, we won! I've still got the train ticket...

I knew then at 17 years old I could die happy! And I never thought in my wildest dreams Liverpool would go on to win that big-eared trophy a further five times.

I remember arriving in this incredible place early on a sunny Wednesday morning - 25th May, having sung songs about this place for the last 72 hours; "We're on our way to Roma on the 25th May!"

We had arrived in the eternal city, this place full of history, drama and beauty, having wondered what it might be like, and now we could see it with our own eyes.

As we heard this morning, Paul had also finally arrived in Rome in 60AD, taking a longer and even more adventurous journey to get there than I had done 1,900 years later!

Paul had arrived at the centre of the world he lived in, the London or Washington of our day. So why was he there, and why had he made this journey to the place he probably knew he would die in sooner or later? And how and why did his journey start?

We need to go back 3 years earlier to AD57 and to Acts 24 and 25. The start of Paul's journey to Rome actually begins in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast north east of Jerusalem where he is for his own protection.

As we heard in last week's readings from Acts he had been taken to the Roman governor Felix after a whole load of trouble and murder plots against Paul by the Jews in Jerusalem.

Interestingly, there must have been a number of zealous young men who literally starved to death as Acts tell us they made a vow not to eat or drink until Paul was dead, such was their opposition to him and his message.

Earlier still in Acts 21 we read that Paul had been warned not to go to Jerusalem by the believers in Phoenicia (again on the coast, north of Caesarea) after one of them had a vision (it actually says, *this is what the Holy Spirit says*) of Paul being tied up and bound.

Often, those who care for us tell us not to do certain things or go to certain places, but if Paul had listened, would this whole chain of events that took him to Rome have ever got off the ground?

Following God's way can be very difficult when there's always a softer option but ultimately, it is the only way, the golden way.

The way of the world will usually, but not exclusively, be easier than the way of God. When Jesus talks about his own forthcoming death, Peter says, "No Lord, *no*" but Jesus rebukes him; "get behind me, Satan" he says to Peter, I must follow God's way, not your way, because as my friend you don't want me to come to any harm.

Jesus tells us to choose the narrow gate rather than the wide gate, which is always easier to get through but leads to destruction.

So, as a result of the Sanhedrin's actions and violence towards Paul, he is taken to the local Garrison under the command of Tribune Claudius Lysias by the centurion for his own protection.

It is during this time with the centurion and Claudius Lysias that Paul brings up his Roman citizenship. This puts the Tribune in a spot as, like

Jesus, the Romans had flogged Paul as a matter of course now the Tribune realises he has had a Roman citizen whipped – big mistake!

A tribune was usually a young army officer in charge of the garrison but whose long term goal would be to go into politics as a senator, in the same way upper and middle class people do today in our country choosing to go into some famous regiment such as the Household Cavalry for a few years before embarking on a career in politics or in the City.

It is during the course of these events that Paul has a vision/message as reported in Acts 23:11 - 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."

Again, similarly as in the trial of Jesus, the case is passed up the chain to the regional governor Felix by the Tribune (keeping his fingers crossed that news of Paul's flogging remains a secret). Two years pass and Felix is replaced as Roman Governor of Judaea by Porcius Festus in 59AD. We assume Paul is under house arrest throughout this time.

Three days after his arrival in Caesarea, the new Roman governor travels to Jerusalem, where, once again the Jewish leaders press their charges against Paul, hoping they can ambush and kill him on route to Jerusalem for another trial.

Festus, instead, invites the Jews to travel to Caesarea to bring their charges against Paul. After they make their allegations, Festus asks Paul if he is willing to go back and be tried in Jerusalem. Paul refuses to go, and uses his legal right as a Roman citizen to appeal to the Emperor in Rome.

In fact, Governor Festus and King Agrippa (the next level up from Governor) agree charges against Paul were not proven and he could have gone free...

Governor Festus and King Agrippa agree that Paul doesn't deserve to be imprisoned. In Acts 26:32 Agrippa adds "We could let this man go free, but he has asked Caesar to hear his case."

Festus agrees to send Paul to the emperor Nero in Rome and the Journey begins.

So why to Rome? As we have said previously it was the London or Washington of Paul's day.

If I can tell you another personal story, 15 years ago, I fulfilled a boyhood dream when my family and I visited the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida. Like most boys of the 60s I grew up fascinated by the Apollo space programme that landed a man on the moon 50 years ago. I always wanted to go there, (Cape Kennedy that is, not the moon), the place where all space journeys started from.

At the start of our tour there was a part called "Ask an Astronaut" where there was a Q&A with a real astronaut (probably one who had been in the ISS). I remember someone asked him, "Do you believe in aliens?" and I remember even clearer his answer. He said, "I would never discount the possibility but if you had travelled so far to reach our earth why would you only appear to a drunken corn farmer in the middle of the Midwest!"

So keeping that story in mind why to Rome? The question answers itself really. If (like the alien) you have a message to proclaim don't go to a quiet island in the Mediterranean – take it to the centre of the known world i.e. Rome!

In Rome there were some Christians and also Jews. Paul would meet with them share the Gospel and the tales of his travels.

We have to remember that many, if not most, early Christians would have been Jewish converts. From there the faith and church would grow out into the known and unknown world.

We know from history as Christianity grew in Rome this brought mass persecution and executions.

I do not speak lightly of the sacrifice of our brothers and sisters who died during the reign of Nero and his successors but with Paul's arrival God had planted his flag at the centre of the world's pagan empire to challenge those who thought they were God in his world at that time. There was only ever going to be one winner!

With persecution comes growth. I remember as a young Christian praying over little cards for believers in Russia and China. That was 30 years ago and now in Russia the state actually looks to the Church for support against the post-soviet tidal wave of the secular/material world.

China has a conservatively estimated 31 million Christians. It is not as easy to be a Christian there as it is in the UK but nothing like as difficult as it was 30 years ago.

The gospel spread because people like Paul and Peter were prepared to put in the hard yards and establish a foothold, knowing it would hurt, and their hands would get cut and dirty. Like a rugby player in the current World Cup smashing through the opposition to set up a ruck or maul so at some point it might lead to someone else scoring a glorious try.

Using another rugby analogy, if Johnny Wilkinson's winning drop goal in 2003 is Paul getting to Rome and bearing witness before Nero then the interplay, then the moves that led to Johnny's kick were Paul being bounced around Jerusalem, Caesarea, Malta and the Mediterranean get him to the right place at the right time.

We know the Church was established in Rome. I am not an historian nor have we time to debate the rights or wrongs of the Roman church through history, but what we can say without fear of contradiction is that Paul's Christian message never died in Rome but went on to light the fire that would make disciples of all nations as Jesus commanded.

We are used to hearing “church attendances are falling” or “the church is in decline.” They might well be in the UK but not in the world.

Unfortunately, like most countries we tend to think our own nation is the world!

According to the Pew Research Centre (The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan American think tank referring to itself as a “fact tank” based in Washington, D.C.), the number of Christians around the world has nearly quadrupled in the last 100 years, from about 600 million in 1910 to more than 2.3 billion in 2015.

But the world’s overall population also has risen rapidly, from an estimated 1.8 billion in 1910 to 6.9 billion in 2010. As a result, Christians make up about the same portion of the world’s population today (32%) as they did a century ago (35%).

This apparent stability, however, masks a momentous shift. Although Europe and the Americas still are home to a majority of the world’s Christians (63%), that share is much lower than it was in 1910 (93%).

At the same time, Christianity has grown enormously in sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, where there were relatively few Christians at the beginning of the 20th century.

The share of the population that is Christian in sub-Saharan Africa climbed from 9% in 1910 to 63% in 2010, while in the Asia-Pacific region it rose from 3% to 7%. Christianity today – unlike a century ago – is truly a global faith.

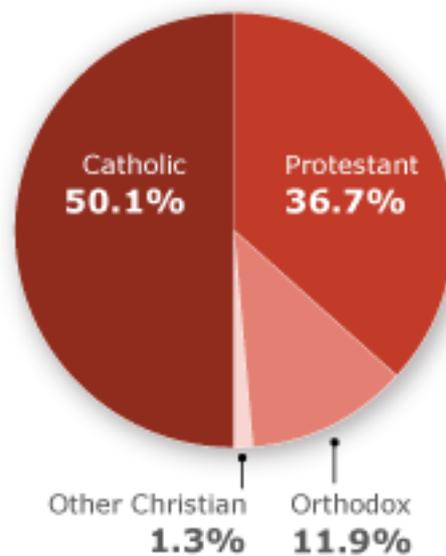
What Jesus asked us to do in Matthew 28 is still going on as we speak right now.

If we follow Jesus, we will get called to make our own journey to Rome, probably not to face death but to take a Christian message to someone, to carry out an act of practical love or to even challenge or rebuke someone over their disregard for God and his ways.

It's scary and it's not something we want to really do (or even think we can do) but like with Paul, God stands there with us as we lay and fix another firm brick in the building and advancement of his eternal kingdom.

Major Christian Traditions

Percentage of Christian population that is ...



Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center's Forum
on Religion & Public Life
Global Christianity, December 2011
