**10th January 2016**

**Acts 22.1-22**

The BBC has made a lavish screen production of war and Peace. Many of you may be relaxing at the end of Sunday nights to it. It was written by Leo Tolstoy, the Russian writer who is regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time.

Born to an aristocratic Russian family in 1828, he is best known for the novels War and Peace (1869) and Anna Karenina (1877).

In the 1870s Tolstoy experienced a profound moral crisis, followed by what he regarded as an equally profound spiritual awakening, as outlined in his non-fiction work A Confession

In that book he described how as a child he rejected Christianity. And he started to search for meaning and purpose in his life. And at first he thought: ‘Life’s just about having a good time! Just make the most of life! Have fun!’ And he entered the social whirl of Moscow and St Petersburg. He drank heavily, he was promiscuous; he led basically a wild life. And he found that left him feeling a bit empty.

He thought, ‘Well, maybe money is the answer.’ He’d inherited a lot of money, and he started to make a lot of money out of his books as well. And he found money’s a bit like seawater: the more you drink of it, the more thirsty you are. That didn’t satisfy.

And he thought, ‘Well, maybe like fame, importance, success – if I can be really successful.’ And he wrote what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes as one of the two or three greatest novels in the whole of world literature. It still didn’t satisfy him. And Tolstoy saw that *that* wasn’t the answer.

And he thought, ‘Well, maybe it’s all about relationships: marriage, family life.’ He married in 1862 and had a very happy family and thirteen children – which he said distracted him from his search for the overall meaning of life!

He was surrounded by what looked like the perfect life – everyone looking at Tolstoy would say, ‘Wow, you’ve got everything! You’ve got complete happiness.’ And he said yet one question drove him to the verge of suicide, and the question was this: ‘What meaning has my life that the inevitability of death does not destroy?’

And he started to think about this, and he thought: ‘Well, the philosophers must have an answer to this. The scientists must have an answer.’ So he started to search in every field of science and philosophy to answer to the question ‘Why do I live?’ And the only answer he came up with was this: ‘In the infinity of space and the infinity of time, infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.’ He didn’t find that very satisfying!

And then he looked around at his friends, his contemporaries, and they weren’t really even facing up to the question. And eventually he found, in the very poor people of Russia, that they had found the answer in their faith in Jesus Christ.

. His literal interpretation of the ethical teachings of Jesus, centering on the Sermon on the Mount, caused him to become a fervent Christian anarchist and pacifist. Tolstoy's ideas on nonviolent resistance, expressed in such works as The Kingdom of God Is Within You, were to have a profound impact on such pivotal 20th-century figures as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

I’m quite sure that none of that will come through in the BBC version of War and Peace – heaven forbid! It has already been criticized for playing down the philosophical questions and playing up the sex and romance. You don’t want to be contemplating the meaning of life on Sunday night you just want to be entertained smoothly before you go to sleep.

Our Alpha Course which starts a week on Monday will offer people the opportunity to discuss the meaning of life and I’m looking forward to those conversations and testimonies.

During this month our sermon themes are on Good News and the bible passages are from the last chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, looking at the story of the end of the life of St Paul. Last week we looked at the end of his second missionary journey which took him to Corinth and how his preaching of the gospel was met with opposition prompting him to change tactics and then find success in a different way. He then embarked on a third missionary journey which saw him having scrapes in Ephesus before coming back to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem he meets up with the other apostles.

The Jerusalem church is Jewish Christians and in the past they have been suspicious of Paul and his mission to the Gentiles. James their leader greets Paul warmly but he and others are anxious about the reception Paul would get from the hardliners. They persuade Paul to go down to the temple, the centre of Jewish religion, and perform some religious duties thereby making a gesture to please them. Although they recognized Paul’s position on the law (Paul regarded it as rubbish compared to knowing Jesus) they thought a little compromise would go a long way. If he were to take part in a little Jewish ceremony it would go down well with his critics.

It’s the kind of advice that may have been suggested to Tony Blair to go and speak to the Women’s Institute: remember that? Or David Cameron to wander up north to inspect inferior flood defences compared to the Tory south. There is never any pleasing of the hardliners. Fundamentalists of whatever ilk always want to be right, absolutely right. If you try and compromise with them – they move back so that you have to move even further until you get to the point where you surrender your freedom for their bondage.

Paul, misguidedly, turns up at the temple to worship. At the temple people recognize him and stir up the crowd against him. There is uproar and a riot. The soldiers step in to protect Paul and also arrest him. Paul startles the army commander by speaking fluent and posh Greek to indicate that he is a learned man of high social standing. The Commander is impressed and let’s Paul address the unruly crowd that just a moment ago was trying to beat Paul up.

It is a remarkable scene and illustrates Paul’s desire to share with others the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even though they want to kill him, Paul wants to reason with them and persuade them that Jesus is the Messiah. He reasserts his freedom to believe. This baying mob want to tear him to pieces because he dares to contravene the teaching of their faith but Paul gives his testimony of how he is similar yet different to them.

He gives them his testimony. It is a model format for anyone who is put on the spot and asked to give a reason for why they are a Christian.

Paul starts off by speaking in Aramaic. He speaks their language. Debbie always says that when we go back up north my accent gets thicker and even she can’t understand me. Communication is so important and comes in many forms for good communication – but finding points of identification are important. Paul not only speaks their language he lists his credentials: born a Jew, born in this city, trained in the law under Gamaliel and just as zealous for God as any of you here today, he proudly declares. He is one of them.

Indeed were all human and we can always find common ground with any human being – we all have similar longings, dreams, hopes, fears. Paul shares who he was before he came to know Christ. His life was upright and moral: he didn’t regard himself as a great sinner – far from it. He believed in persecuting the followers of the Way – one of the early names for Christians – he was acting as a righteous Jew, protecting his religion from corruption and heresy.

But then he has an encounter with Jesus. He experienced a blinding light on the road to Damascus as he was on the way to persecute followers of Jesus. The voice of Jesus addresses him ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’

Paul had earlier mentioned Gamaliel and how he was brought up under his teaching. Gamaliel is mentioned in chapter 5 of Acts where he address the Sanhedrin the ruling body of the Jews in Jerusalem and says that they should be careful of attacking the followers of Jesus because they may just be attacking God. This is the very thing that Jesus accuses Paul of. It is a caution to any vehement attack on anyone who holds a different opinion or belief to us. You may inadvertently be attacking something of God. That is not to say valid criticisms and opinions cannot and should not be shared but vitriolic denunciation and attacks come from a place of arrogance where you believe you are absolutely right. That is the preserve of the almighty.

Paul is trying to get his audience to examine their prejudices and open their minds to what he has to say.

Then he shares the remarkable story of how he encountered Ananias who prayed for him and he found healing for his blindness and his commission from the Lord in a vision.

Testimony and experience is always hard to argue against. Something had happened to Paul that changed his life and all he is doing is to give a reason for that change.

Many have tried to psychoanlayise Paul and suggest he was suffering a delusion that he interpreted as a vision from heaven. But the key thing is not the ‘how’ of what went on but the ‘what’ of his belief. Jesus was central to that belief. People then and now have tried to find explanations, any explanation other than the one which means it actually happened that Jesus really is alive and addresses people and transforms them from persecutors into preachers. Paul stands before this crowd as a person who has been transformed through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

Nicky Gumbel who created the Alpha Course said ‘I was an atheist, and I never really understood why Christians felt it necessary to talk about their faith. I was an atheist, but I didn’t try and convert people to atheism! So why do Christians talk about their faith? I thought the best kind of Christian would be the one who never talked about their faith – they just lived it out but never told anybody even that they were a Christian.

And sometimes people say, ‘Well, isn’t that the best kind of Christians, the ones that just live it out?’ And often they talk about a member of their family who is this amazing Christian who never talks about their faith. I call it the ‘Uncle Norman’ factor. Everyone has an Uncle Norman who’s this amazing Christian. But the question I want to ask is: how did Uncle Norman become a Christian? How did he find out? Someone must have told him.

So why should we tell others? Well, first of all, Jesus told us to. The word ‘Go’ appears in the Bible 1,514 times. Jesus was always saying to people, ‘Go! Go and tell! Go and invite! This is such wonderful news! I’ve come that you might have life and have it abundantly! Go and tell people about it. Go and make disciples.’

Second reason is because of the needs of other people out there. There’s such a hunger. Like if you were in a desert and you came across an oasis, you would want to tell people about it. And Jesus satisfies that inner hunger for meaning, for purpose. He died for us to set us free! This is amazing news that we can bring to other people who are often in such desperate need. A recognition of that need sometimes comes from surprising sources

Russell Brand said this. He said: ‘Drugs and alcohol are not my problem. Reality is my problem. Drugs and alcohol are my solution, to fill up a hole inside of me.’

So we do it out of love for other people. And we do it because it’s such good news. That’s what the word ‘gospel’ means: it means ‘good news’! The message of Jesus is the most wonderful news.

And good news travels fast. I heard some good news the other day and I rang up someone else and said have you heard the news about so and so. They said ‘oh I already heard that from what’s his name. People love to share good news.

Of course we can do it in an insensitive way. But we can also be so fearful that we don’t say a word. Trying to get the balance, the balance of love, is the course to follow.

Paul would write that he used persuasion, not pressure, to win people for the gospel.

Paul said, ‘We try and persuade people, because this is so wonderful, it’s such good news, we want everyone to know about Jesus, and we try and persuade people of the truth of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.’

And he did it by reasoning and explaining. Because it’s not a blind leap of faith; it’s possible to persuade people by showing them good reasons to believe.

I heard about a man called Albert McMakin. He was 24 years of age, he was a farmer, he’d just become a Christian and he was really excited. He heard that there was this event going on where someone was speaking about Jesus, and he decided he would invite all his friends.

So he’d got this old van, and there was one guy he really wanted to invite to this event. This guy was a farmer’s son, and he really wasn’t interested. He had lots of girlfriends; he was a very good-looking guy. And Albert McMakin thought, ‘How am I going to get him?’ So eventually he said to him, ‘Look, would you drive the van?’ And the guy said, ‘Okay, well, I’ll drive the van. I don’t want to come in, but I’ll drive the van.’

 And he came along and drove the van, and was interested to see what was going on, so he popped in at the back, and he was spellbound. And he went back night after night after night. And on the last night the speaker said, ‘If you want to give your life to Jesus, come to the front.’ And this farmer’s son got up and went to the front.

Since that day, that person has spoken to 210 million people in person about the Christian faith. He's been the friend and confidant of nine American Presidents. And he’s spoken – not live, but through television and so on – to half the world’s population. His name, of course, is Billy Graham. The year was 1934.

We can't all be Billy Grahams, but we can all be Albert McMakins! We can all be the one who says, ‘Come and see’ and bring our friends to Christ.

Sadly for Paul his words did not persuade his audience. When he mentioned that he was reaching out to the Gentiles the Jews in his audience thought that was o radical and a betrayal of their religion – so they shouted for him to die again. The gospel is challenging. The gospel of God’s love for all, regardless of who you are and where you come form is deeply disturbing for those who believe only they have the truth, only they are right.

Let pray for courage to share the good news that makes a difference to our lives. May we share it in respect and love, but most of all may we share it.