**24th January 2016**

**Acts 27 and 28**

The head of Ofsted has confirmed churches will have to register Sunday schools if parliament approves government proposals aimed at tackling extremism.

If passed the proposals would see anywhere offering care to a child for more than six hours a week having to register with Ofsted. Sir Michael Wilshaw, the head of Ofsted, said they would have to registered so the government "knows they're there".

He said: "The government wants Sunday schools, madrasas and after-school clubs to be registered. "We won't inspect every one of them, but we will know they exist. If there are concerns - if whistle blowers tell us there's an issue - then we will go in."

But the plans have provoked concern among a range of voluntary and faith groups, plus MPs across the political divide

Dr David Landrum, director of advocacy at the Evangelical Alliance, said: "These proposals amount to the state regulation of private religion.

"Sunday schools in churches are publically advertised and in open access buildings. It's also highly unlikely that extremist groups of concern are going to register with the government.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Conservative MP Sir Edward Leigh, who brought about a Westminster Hall debate on the issue, described the out-of-school settings scheme as a "total and utter distraction" adding it was "fundamentally illiberal" and constituted "big government at its worst".

He called on the government to think again before it "unleashes a whirlwind of destructive over-regulation" on the voluntary sector.

He criticised the government for wasting money on inspecting churches when it was Islamic institutions that were the problem: "Why does tackling abuse and radicalisation in a very, very tiny number of Madrasas mean that every voluntary group in England that instructs children for six hours a week or more has to register with the state?"

He said the proposals were like taking "a great sledgehammer to crack a nut".

He added: "If you're an extremist you don't register and you don't talk about cutting off people's heads when the Ofsted inspector is around."

He went on: "The truth is that all these thousands of hobby groups are only being forced to register so the system looks even handed... the Government is terrified of not looking even handed and therefore they are bringing into the net all these other harmless groups."

Stephen Timms, Labour MP for East Ham said he thought making religious instruction subject to a state-controlled version of values was "deeply, deeply problematic".

He suggested Government was "coming up with ideas in order to be seen to be doing something".[[2]](#endnote-2)

I would be fascinated to know what OFSTED inspectors would make of us. At least they would be exposed to the gospel as part of their inspection. Hopefully they would be challenged that we don’t judge the worth and value of people by what grades they get and how shiny and bright their classroom looks. They might regard us as preaching an extremist message – after all just believing in God in secular Britain is a bit eccentric and rebellious. When you read the gospels you will be told to sell all your possessions and give to the poor; love your enemies; turn the other cheek; do not worship idols and false gods and that Jesus is Lord. Perhaps we would be classed as a threat to our capitalistic, consumeristic and competitive society and a danger to national security?

Certainly St Paul was viewed in such light as he shared the gospel in the first century. This month we have been looking at the theme of Good News and the last chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. We have touched on St Paul’s missionary journeys around the Mediterranean world.

Last time I spoke we explored how Paul had caused a riot in the temple at Jerusalem and been arrested. He told the baying mob his testimony of how he had been converted on the road to Damascus. He declared to them Jesus is the Messiah who had been crucified yet rose from the dead. Through faith in Jesus, the Gentiles, the non-Jews, would be accepted as the people of God. The religious Jews in the temple wanted Paul killed – not only for claiming that Jesus, the crucified criminal in their eyes, was the longed for Messiah, but also the claim that the Gentiles could be accepted into the covenant as the people of God. Radical extreme views for their day which caused uproar.

Paul is taken away by the Roman authorities under threat of his life. He is holed up in Caesarea, the Roman fort on the coast for two years and tried by various Roman governors. Paul, a Roman citizen, demands to be put on trial before Caesar so off to Rome he must go. Escorted by a Roman centurion and other guards they set sail. But it is winter and a storm blows up.

One of the worst experiences I had as a parent was on a channel ferry crossing with the kids when they were very young. We had just had a camping holiday in Brittany and we took the Ferry from Roscoff back to Plymouth. Having packed up the tent early that morning and driven to the port we were hungry and so decided to pack down a full English breakfast in anticipation of getting back to British cuisine. Then the wind picked up and the storm came in as the boat sailed out of the docks. It was one of those boat journeys where one moment you are looking at the sky and the next moment you are staring into the sea. The kids felt sick, Debbie and I felt sick and we had a horrible journey home. Being sick and still having to have responsibility for small children was quite a challenge.

In a storm at sea there is nowhere to hide. Paul had been right in saying that they should have stopped at the last port and not set sail in this weather. Although starting his speech with ‘I told you so… you should have taken my advice… were not the best way of winning friends and influencing people. Paul doesn’t list ‘tact’ as a fruit of the spirit).

On board Paul’s ship they start to throw things over board. The point is then to enable the ship to sail as efficiently as possible. For that you need all kinds of tackle: ropes, extra sails, especially the extremely heavy main yard. But when things get really tough, all that has to go as well.

Like our own lives, when a crisis blows up some times we have to jettison things in order to survive.

The reader may recall the story of Jonah. Remember how Jonah was running away from Tarshish to avoid having to go and preach to the great imperial city of Nineveh. When the great storm came, the sailors did what Paul’s sailors did: they threw the cargo overboard and also ended up throwing Jonah overboard with it.

Luke the writer of Acts makes the point that Paul is not Jonah. He is not running away; he is being faithful to his calling to preach in the great imperial capital to which he is bound; and he is certainly not going to be thrown overboard.

Instead in a dramatic reversal, he tells the ships company to cheer up. He has had a vision (and we the readers know what the sailors probably didn’t, that when Paul says he’s had a vision it’s worth listening to). An angel stood beside him during the night, an angel ‘of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve’, a wonderfully localized and personalized description of God for an audience who knew many gods. The angel has told Paul that he must indeed stand before Caesar. That’s what this voyage is all about. And all the rest of them will be safe along with him. They are going to be shipwrecked ‘on some island’; its sounds as though Paul has seen a glimpse, in his vision, of an island with them crashing on the shore, thought he doesn’t know which island this will be.

Paul’s vision is the turning point in the story. Up to then they were going down into darkness; now things are still bad, but there is a light shining, albeit a light visible only to faith. A word from God makes all the difference.

In all the storms and shipwrecks of our lives – lookout for the word from God. It is a light to steer you home to safety.

The story has got to the point where, in the story of Jesus, death could not hold him (acts 2.24). Paul has to go, one more time, through the process he describes in 2 Corinthians 4, immediately after his description of seeing the ‘light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah’. We have, he says (4.7, 10) this treasure in clay jars; we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may always be made visible in our bodies. That is the pattern of apostolic life. That is how the gospel works through, taking on the cosmic forces of evil, which do the worst they can to Jesus’ followers and servants as they struggle ahead in obedience to their vocation. It is as though what Paul wrote two chapters later was a prophecy rather than a report: ‘As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in affliction, hardships, calamites, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger... as dying, and see – we are alive! (2 Cor 6.4-5,9). Paul’s own understanding of the cross, etched into the story of his own apostolic ministry, helps us see what at a level too deep for theological formulae, Luke is saying throughout this tale.

There are many Christians who have been taught that once they have faith everything will flow smoothly. Acts replies: you have not yet considered what it means to take up the cross. If the gospel of Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah means anything at all, it means that those who carry it will have it branded into their own souls. Faith is costly. It will cost you in time, money, compassion. You may have your heart ripped open because you care with the love of Christ. A love that went to the cross. You may face opposition, hardship, poverty all because of Christ. But you will be alive in Christ is what Paul writes.

The idea of the church as a little ship was probably not invented at this stage, but Luke is already there. The storm does not mean the journey is futile. They merely mean that Jesus is claiming the world as his own, and that the powers of the world will do their best to resist. Those who are caught up in the middle of it all must recognise the mark of the cross for what it is, and claim the victory already won in the unique events of Calvary.

Don’t be afraid Paul. You must appear before Caesar’.

The whole gospel project is not without risks. Just when we were heaving a sigh of relief and thinking all was going to be well, it reminds us again of the fragility of the whole project of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

We have just celebrated Christmas – the story of Jesus being born into poverty and raised by refugees. What if he had died of influenza? What if he’d been kicked by a camel and never recovered? Where was God’s health and safety plan and risk assessment? There is a risk God takes in everything he does, the risk of creation itself, the risk of making a world other than himself, the risk of deciding to rescue it using a human family, by becoming himself a human being.

I’m reminded of a legend that recounts the return of Jesus to heaven after his time of earth. He returned bearing the marks of his earthly pilgrimage with its cruel cross and shameful death.

The angel Gabriel approached Him and said, ‘Master, You must have suffered terribly for people down there.’

‘I did’, said Jesus.

‘And’ continued Gabriel, ‘do they now know all about how you loved them and what you did for them?’

‘Oh no’ said Jesus. ‘Not yet. Right now, only handful of people in Palestine know and even they will find out how much I loved them as they follow in my ways and make a difference to my world in my name.’

Gabriel was perplexed. ‘Then what have you done?’ he asked, ‘to let all people know about your love for them and how that love should change the world?’

‘Well, I’ve asked Peter, James, John, Paul and a few others to tell people about me. Those who are told will in turn tell others, and the gospel will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of humankind will hear about me and what I have done on their behalf.’

Gabriel frowned and looked sceptical. He knew that people weren’t dependable. ‘Yes’ he said, ‘but what if Peter and Paul, James and John, grow weary? What if the people who come after them forget? What if, way down in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, people get too busy or too comfortable to tell others about you and do your work? Haven’t you made any other plans?’

‘No, I’ve made no other plans, Gabriel,’ Jesus answered. ‘I’m counting on them – I trust them’.

Risky business: depending on us?

And if we say that the risk isn’t really that great because God remains in control, I think Luke would say emphatically that is both thoroughly true and thoroughly misleading. The apparent overruling clash of providence and utter human wickedness, seen so graphically in earlier references in Acts such as Acts 2.24 (But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of the death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him) is worked out, not through everything being cheerfully determined in advance, so that all we have to do is sit back and watch it unfold. Just think through this chapter. God says you will have a shipwreck but you will survive and then you face Caesar. Is that comforting or not? You still have to go through a shipwreck and the prize is still that you will face execution by Caesar. But neither is it worked out through dark, unrelieved, groping around in which we have no certain hope, no security, no assurance, no strong sense of God’s living and rescuing presence with us. That too is well and truly ruled out by Luke’s writing. Somehow, the answer to the puzzle of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is not to be found in a formula, but in flesh and blood. In Jesus flesh and blood. And in our flesh and blood. Maybe all true doctrines are, in the last analysis, like that.

Yes we need to believe them. That is, the sign in our hearts and our heads need to be drawn by the Spirit of the faith which is the badge of all Jesus followers. But we need to live them; or perhaps we should say, they need to live us, to live in us, to leap into the sea in us, to catch hold of such bits and pieces of broken ship as we can and head for the shore. That perhaps is what salvation is all about. God saves, but we trust, have faith, hang on as best we can.

Because in this story that is the word ‘salvation’, that is used. All hope of being saved had been lost (verse 20). If the sailors had carried out their secret plan to slip away in the ship’s boat, they could none of them be saved (verse 31). Taking some food, involved the breaking of bread! Which will be for your salvation (verse 44). Luke could hardly make it clearer that only as we trust in God can we be saved. Through the waters to safety. That’s the Noah story, the Exodus Story, the John the Baptist story, the Jesus story. The Paul story. Our story. Faith is going to prevent the storm. Faith is what gets you through the storm.

Paul says, in probably his first letter that he wrote Galatians, ‘I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me (Galatians 2.19-20). Through the cross, through the waters, to salvation. This is the heart of Paul’s own understanding of Jesus death and our hope.

He would end up in Rome. He would be greeted by Christians who had probably read his letter to them. He would be under house arrest for two years before being put on trial before Caesar. Christian tradition has it that he was beheaded for his faith outside the walls of Rome under the order of Nero. Luke doesn’t end his account of the Acts of the Apostles with the account of Paul’s death. Perhaps he didn’t want to end on what may have seemed a negative note. Perhaps he wrote Acts before it happened. We will never know. What we do know is that the last verse he writes in Acts is the following: ‘He (Paul) proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance.’

May God make us equally bold in the work for his kingdom.

*(with help from Tom Wright: Acts for Everyone, SPCK 2008)*

1. <http://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Ofsted-confirms-Sunday-schools-will-have-to-register-under-government-plans> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Bizarre-and-ill-thought-out-Tories-slam-Sunday-school-regulation-plans?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=6683898_daily%20news%20email%2021jan&dm_i=16DQ,3Z9BU,KCOFX7,ED7GK,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)