

Paul

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Lord, we thank you so much for your holy word. And we pray, Lord, that you would teach it to us.

We thank you, Lord, that this isn't like any other book, but Lord, it is a book inspired by your Holy Spirit. And so, Lord, we beseech you now to send your spirit upon us that we may understand your word and we may find strength to put it into practice.

And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. So, in Acts chapter 19, we read these words. Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? I, in preparation for this talk, I had a kind of suspicion.

And my suspicion was, I wonder how much, in the general tenor of things, people really appreciate St. Paul.

[1 : 14] In the modern world, he's been found and charged and pronounced guilty by radical feminists as a misogynist.

And if you look at those lists of people of significance in history, you will find lots of eminent and able people, people like Thomas Edison, who, as you know, invented what?

The light bulb. I don't know about you, you know, I'm quite glad that he was able to shed light on us. People like Isaac Newton.

Where would we be if we didn't really understand gravity these days? And most of the lists do include Jesus Christ. But none of the lists I looked at included St. Paul, which seemed to me to be a mysterious thing.

Paul's letters have surely been a spiritual inspiration to millions and millions and millions of people since the time of his being here amongst us on earth.

[2 : 40] You might ask yourself, what would we be ignorant about if St. Paul had not written his letters? How would we know about Holy Communion?

Okay, Jesus did celebrate the Last Supper and did this in remembrance of me. But it's in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 that the great apostle spells out A, the significance of Holy Communion and B, reminds us that we shouldn't take Holy Communion without examining ourselves.

It's an interesting thing in modern church with what they call the parish communion movement. I sometimes hear clergy speaking about communion as though it were medicine.

Come up and take this, it'll make you well. It's not what Paul says. Paul says exactly the opposite. He says, if you receive communion without examining your lives, then he says, this is the reason why some of you have become ill and some of you have died.

For Paul, it was that critical. That's why I'm not comfortable with those churches that celebrate Holy Communion every day of the week because my fear is that familiarity can breed a certain contempt.

[4 : 08] What would we know about communion? What would we know about the atonement? The way Jesus puts sinners like us right with God. How would we understand that without St. Paul?

How would we know about sanctification? The fact that we're supposed to be growing more like Jesus every day. What would we know about the gifts of the Spirit or the fruit of the Spirit without St. Paul?

And what would we know about the character of the church without Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 12 and Romans chapter 12 where Paul likens the church that's us to a body.

He says when all the parts of the body are working in harmony that's when we feel whole. I'm at the age now where it's in a little less harmony than it used to be.

And I notice it. No. Without St. Paul the gospel would be absolutely denuded of any meaning.

[5 : 23] And my guess is that without St. Paul's careful explanations in his epistles throughout the New Testament Christianity would have died the death of a kind of slightly strange sect of Judaism

based in Jerusalem.

So I want to say four things briefly to you this morning about this man Paul of Tarsus. Just to remind you we're in the middle of a course which is called Great Journeys of the New Testament.

It would actually have been better to have been called Great People of the Bible. Paul we note was somebody who was transformed.

In Acts chapter 7 and the final verse we read there that as the deacon Stephen was being brutally killed by being stoned you know what stoning was?

It meant that they would bury you up to your neck in sand so you could not move and they would chuck big rocks at your head until you died. Paul was a witness to the stoning of Stephen and the last verse of chapter 7 says Paul in those days was called Saul Saul of Tarsus said Saul approved of his murder he was an antagonist of Christianity he did not like Christians he went out of his way to try and bring the Christian movement to an end just two chapters later in the book of Acts you can read about the conversion of St. Paul how the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and his life was changed and the greatest antagonist of the Christian faith became the greatest protagonist the man on whom a lot of our understanding of the gospel and its ramifications for us as disciples is based on his teaching as I've said he was transformed and the Christian life starts with an act of transformation that moment when we own our faith in Jesus for ourselves what an amazing transformation took place in Paul what an amazing transformation is taking place in some in some of you and wouldn't it be great if that transformation could take place in those of you who know that you've not really turned yourself over to the lordship of Jesus

[8 : 34] Christ think how different this church would be if it were full of people who were full on for Jesus all for Jesus I surrender think of it think what it would be like we would change that awful statistic that in most churches 20% of the people supply 80% of the money and 80% of the horsepower I always used to tell my clergy those of you who can break that terrible statistic will make a difference in this world for the sake of Jesus Christ and his gospel Paul was a transformed man secondly he was a well-travelled man I came across some travel blogs and one of the things that travel blogs like to tell you about is some of the ridiculous excuses that people give for trying to get a refund on their holidays somebody seriously wrote this nobody told me that there would be fish in the water the children were terrified we were on holiday in

Spain and everybody just spoke Spanish we booked an excursion to a water park but nobody told us we had to take our swimming gear the beach was too sandy the list goes on of stupidity stability St Paul travelled at a time when travelling was a risk I mean I get that travelling today in the United Kingdom is something of a risk when you sit on that carefully fashioned car park the M6 or you try and travel south to Cornwall and Devon and can end up somebody told me recently it would take them 13 hours to get from Clevedon to somewhere down south because the motorway was shut for seven hours Paul travelled at a time when frankly the risk of being stuck in traffic was pretty minimal but the risk of being attacked and killed and robbed was massive what we know about St Paul is he did three major what we call mission journeys he went out from into

Asia Minor and travelled as far west as Italy some historians think he actually got to Spain but I think mainline historians believe that he was actually put to death in Rome the good thing about St Paul is he teaches us something which is generally lacking in the 21st century church in the west he understood the great commission Jesus didn't say hang about in churches everybody and hopefully people show up no he said go go into all the world and make disciples of all nations all cultures Paul surely got that he didn't jump on a plane or get in a fancy car to drive on his journeys no he had to walk or at best would have a donkey with him but he understood this and we need to understand this the gospel cannot just be trapped in our church buildings amongst a group of people who seem to be happy to grow all together imagining that if we sit on the premises we can stand on the promises

Paul knew that the principal dynamic of the church because it is the principal dynamic of the Holy Spirit was to force energy outwards into the world that doesn't mean you've all got to go home from here and join the church mission society and end up somewhere in the world in fact there's a reversal of that going and we're now receiving quite rightly missionaries from other parts of the world where things are going a lot better in the churches than they are here in the west did you know that the top five fastest growing churches in the United Kingdom are all Nigerian black led churches somebody say hallelujah Paul understood this Paul knew that there needed to be an outward dynamic in the churches and friends in these days when all we're reminded about is our

decline we need to really take note of this the third thing is

Paul taught he was a teacher he understood something that Dallas Willard the great spiritual writer noted about the 21st century church he said this there is a great omission he wrote a book called the great omission can you imagine for a moment what that omission was in Dallas Willard's mind Dallas Willard says all we've been interested in is getting people to the point of conversion getting people to come to church Dallas Willard says and I believe he was right that the missing dimension is discipleship how we grow together into the likeness of Jesus Christ how the process of sanctification works in us that we might become conquerors of those parts of our life that Paul called the flesh the parts of our lives that get us into trouble if you have a serious issue with an issue of the flesh today

[14 : 56] I want to say this to you there is hope however desperate it feels however much in debt you feel however addicted you feel there is hope for you because the Holy Spirit if you will allow him can deal with any of those things that push you towards behaviour that undermine Jesus Jesus said of the Holy Spirit when he comes he'll convict you of what is right and wrong and Paul taught us that the Holy Spirit will give us the strength to overcome these things stop drinking that extra drink stop taking those tablets or smoking that tobacco stop looking at members of the opposite sex of sexual objects St. Paul knew all about the flesh knew all about the sins of the flesh and the devil and showed us a way that we can overcome he was a teacher imagine this in Acts chapter 19 we're told that he went to the hall of tyrannous it was a big debating place where the Greek philosophers would come together and the general public would gather did you notice what it said about Paul's ministry there it said he remained there for two years until what everybody in

Asia Minor had heard heard the gospel what an amazing commitment that is I'll tell you something I am troubled by the increasing godlessness of our times and sometimes dear friends it feels a very lonely life but I'm troubled by it I am so troubled by it that I wake up in the middle of the night and think about unsaved people and their lot and then I start to think to myself how much of this has happened on your watch Mike Hill what are you going to do about it I am ashamed when I hear that John Wesley a great Methodist thank God that we're in partnership with the Methodists and pray that the spirit of John Wesley would permeate all of us John Wesley I worked out on my calculator preached 44 sermons a week knocks into a cocked hat doesn't it those churches which have one main service on a Sunday knocks into a cocked hat the fact that most of our preaching takes place within the hallowed walls of a church you're sitting saying well street preachers are weird tell you something when I was a 17 year old moron grade A my heart was stirred by a man who stood outside Old Trafford football ground with a sandwich board on which read probably not the most positive message it said the wages of sin is death and for years we used to take his bowler hat off it and chuck it into the river

Irwell chucked his hat and one day he said to me why don't you come round to my house for tea so my friends and I went round there ready to cause mayhem and for five minutes I suppose we did and then for the first time this dear man explained the gospel to me I went away thinking I could never be good enough for this deal you know I don't know if I could keep it going but you know the idea that death won't be a brick wall the idea that I can be forgiven for the many bad things I've done really appealed to me it was a year later in God's right time when I surrendered to Jesus Christ and my life not quite as dramatically as St.

Paul was transformed the last thing I want to say he was transformed he travelled he taught and the fourth thing which I really admire about St. Paul is he was tenacious in the second Corinthians you read there Paul apostleship is seriously under scrutiny by the people in Corinth there were some people there who doubted that he could claim to be an apostle because he had only met a kind of vision of the risen Christ not met the risen Christ in person and I can imagine that this was really undermining you know he tried to teach this church he tried to present himself as an authentic apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and on this occasion Paul tells him here are my qualifications let me read them to you he says this are they servants of Christ speaking of his opponents are they servants of Christ

[20 : 38] I am out of my mind to talk like this I am more I have worked much harder been imprisoned more frequently been flogged more severely and been exposed to death again and again five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one three times I was beaten with rods once I was stoned three times I was shipwrecked I spent a night and a day in the open sea I have been constantly on the move I have been in danger from rivers in danger from bandits in

danger from my own countrymen in danger from Gentiles in danger in the city in danger in the country you'd think wouldn't you that any sane person who'd been through that kind of stuff would say you know what I think I need a sabbatical I need a break from this this is too much Lord and you know I know you understand my need for not Paul oh no before he started his ministry he went to we don't know much about this but he went to Arabia and spent a while there after his conversion you know quite what he was doing there was he kind of learning the Old

Testament trying to work out to himself well what does this gospel mean how could I articulate it how can I go into the world and talk about it but he did and the first sign of opposition he didn't give up he was tenacious in his willingness to suffer for his faith and he was tenacious because he would stand up for the gospel when people threatened him interesting to me that in the early church the patriarchs the early fathers of the church all saw that this was a really important role for them and that was to stand up for the gospel you could get the impression today couldn't you this truly disturbs me that the church is more concerned with kind of accommodation of 20th century godlessness

I remember once a big argument in some synod I was gently snoring through and the debate was should people who never have anything to do with the church have never darkened the door of the church should they have a vote at the annual general meeting of the church I mean I was young and rash and I thought to myself this is wrong you know I wouldn't go down to the masonical and tell them how to run their show because I don't believe in freemasonry I wouldn't go down you know when the women's institute have invited me to give a tour can tell them how to kind of you know recover the crime wouldn't do that not interested why would we allow people this is still the law if you don't believe me you can read the booklet on it but there were serious people standing up defending to the hilt the idea that godless people could come into your church and vote at the AGM I had this in my ministry we once put some floodlights we haven't got the right permissions for it put some floodlights in the churchyard so at night we could sort of highlight the tower do you know what I mean so we did it and we were very very careful at 10 o'clock it switched off in the winter I got to the AGM we normally would get about 300 people at it which was surprising this time 450 people showed up 150 of them nothing to do with the church nothing to do with the gospel they came to complain about light pollution guess who won the Lord won they gave speeches which were terrible were just angry and when it came to a vote they were silenced should we allow that is that the kind of accommodation that really means the church is going to go nowhere slowly when Paul got to

Ephesus he found a bunch of people who'd been baptized by John the Baptist that was a good thing it was a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins but Paul had a rather penetrating question for them did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized they're like what did you receive the Holy Spirit we didn't even know there was one so Paul did what Paul does he gone together he laid hands on them and those elders were empowered refitted for ministry in the name of the Trinitarian God Father Son and Holy Spirit and things began to happen in Ephesus you know what I'm praying for the day when we begin to say as a common occurrence things are beginning to happen in

[26 : 36] Clevedon why because the people of God are transformed the people of God understand that the dynamic of the church needs to be outwards not inwards because they will understand that discipleship is taught not caught and they will understand what it is to be a genuine follower of Jesus Christ to conclude you're sitting here this morning saying I don't I've never known this transformation maybe God is whispering in your ear this morning maybe you're the kind of Christian who is sitting in church and thinks that I'm going to sit here and hopefully you know if we jazz up the music a bit and you know do a bit of arm waving and hip swinging not too much people will come no people want to

God wants a people who are ready to go are you a person that understands that teaching is critical to sanctification becoming becoming more like Jesus if it's true that the gospel is caught and not taught it is only true that discipleship is taught and not caught well obviously I'm preaching to the choir because you're here this morning but how many of you are prepared to commit yourselves for instance to a home group where you can really get to grips with scripture and discuss it and work out what that might mean for you and for your group and if you want to join a home group where's Carolyn there she is I see an arm waving stand up for a moment Carolyn give us a twirl you go and talk to Carolyn because you need to do that she coordinates our home groups in this church and

finally for those of you who are feeling a bit not quite right those of you who are even thinking of giving up on church those of you who are thinking of giving up on God remember the tenacity of St. Paul remember what he went through and of course one of the most significant things I haven't said to you about St. Paul was if it was not for St. Paul it's not clear whether the earliest of the early church people thought that the gospel would ever be for Gentiles for non Jewish people and we're here and God is waiting for us to say yes God is wanting to hear from us not just the lyrics of a hymn but from our hearts all to Jesus I surrender friends if ever there was a game changer in human history it was this man if there was an example for us to take up and follow it was this man's example if ever there was a time for the church to hear this message it is surely today let us pray our gracious father we thank you for

Paul and for his amazing exposition of atonement of sanctification of the gifts of the spirit of all those wonderful doctrines Lord that we read not just to know about but to appropriate into our hearts Lord this morning would you short circuit the difference between our heads and our hearts Lord that we might believe and in believing we might show forth evidently our belief in this troubled and godless world did you receive the holy spirit when you believe that's a great question Lord and for those of us who feel disempowered unempowered whatever Lord we pray that the holy spirit would come to us transform us teach us and make us tenacious in this matter of bringing the mission of the church to the world and Lord thank you that we are a church not just with a mission but with a message and we pray that you would raise up men and women who would be able to articulate that gospel in the way that

Saint Paul did that many might come to know you and be saved for eternity through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen