

Study 11 10/4/14

Always Kingdom Minded

Acts 28:17-31

This last speech in *Acts* is about the kingdom of God. The term is used twice and, as noted earlier, is a summary term for all that the apostles preached. Given that Jesus lived and taught the kingdom, including after his resurrection, and that it has been used interchangeably with other terms in the *Acts* speeches, it will be good to consider how the kingdom of God has 'fared' through the first three decades of the Church's life.

The setting

Jesus said the gospel would be preached in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth (1:8). The fulfillment of this has been recorded in six sections each ending with a comment about the word of God or the church 'multiplying greatly' (6:7), 'multiplying' (9:31), increasing and multiplying (12:24); increasing in number daily (16:5), increasing and prevailing mightily (19:20), and now, Paul preaching for two years 'with all boldness and unhindered' in Rome (28:31). Against all odds, with persecution from Jews and ineptness from Rome, faith in Jesus Christ has been 'put on the map'. Luke wants us to know 'the certainty of these things' (Luke 1:4) lest the lethargy or hatred of our age discourage us.

Paul has come to Rome because he appealed for justice to Caesar. He has endured a shipwreck because sailors would not wait in Crete, and, after a shipwreck, three months wintering in Malta. They arrive in Rome in 62 AD.

Christian 'brothers' in Rome hear of Paul's coming and travel up to 70 kilometres along the Appian Way to greet him. They make him thankful and give him courage. A Christian community has been in the capital for some 10 years (Aquila and Pricilla were expelled from Rome to Corinth as early as 51 AD and this may be because of Jewish/Christian trouble there—as Acts 18:1-2; so F. F. Bruce, p. 367f). Paul has written to Rome early in 57 AD calling believers 'faithful' and they are well known in the East by all the churches (Rom. 1:8).

We don't hear any more about the time Paul may have spent with the church in Rome but we may be sure that he did (Rom. 1:8-15). But Luke's purpose is to show us the spread of the gospel, so he says that after only three days, Paul asks for the local Jewish leaders to come to him. He addresses them as 'brothers'—that is, still members of the covenant made with their fathers. He has freedom (apart from the soldier permanently attached to him—v. 20) and perhaps could have gone to any one of several synagogues in Rome but chooses to ask their leaders to come to him, as they do.

The speeches

There is nothing new in what Paul says to the Jews here. First, he has not broken Israel's law but reported the fulfillment of their hope. Second, given that the gospel is truth for all nations, he wants it to be known that he has done nothing wrong against Rome by breaking their law or starting a rebellion. Third, his 'chain' is because of the hope of Israel, and, because the Jews have objected to Christ being the fulfillment of this hope. Christ is front and centre of all that he wants to say. He is in Rome because Rome's leaders in Caesarea were too interested in humouring Jewish opinion and he had appealed to Caesar. He records no complaint against his own people.

The Jewish leaders are diplomatic and evasive in their replies, not wanting to upset their Jewish leaders or the Romans among whom they live. They have no official letters telling

them how to treat Paul, just reports of Jewish opposition to this 'sect' from many regions. They want to hear about this themselves and arrange a time to do so.

So, for a whole day, Paul reasons from the Scriptures that Jesus is their King (as in 8:12), that God's reign has been established in him and that he alone is Israel's hope.

'Kingdom' in Acts and Luke

As noted before, 'kingdom' is the word used to describe the subject of his conversation with the Jews in Rome (vv. 23, 31). For three years, this was what Jesus taught and why he healed. It was what he died for, even making promises about who could enter the kingdom while he was on the cross. It was what he taught after his resurrection, explaining to the apostles that they only needed to be witnesses to him—nothing more (1:3, 6).

Preaching the kingdom (in *Acts*) is announcing that Christ is Lord, or King, that he reigns at God's right hand and that all things are under his hand (2:34-36). It is prophesying that this kingdom will climax with Christ's return in power (3:21). Many enemies remain and it is entered 'through many tribulations' (14:22). To reject this teaching of Jesus being King is to be disobedient (19:8). The many facets of this kingdom need to be opened up by teaching 'anything that is necessary', 'turning to God' and 'faith in Christ', 'the grace of God' and 'the whole counsel of God' (20:20-21, 24, 27, 32).

It has been important to see the intersection of the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world as Peter, and then Paul engage Israel and Rome. The church must give to Caesar what belongs to him but to God what belongs to him (Matt. 22:21; cf. Luke 23:2; also Rom. 13:7). The emphasis is on giving to God what is God's! His Christ has all authority in heaven and earth, is bringing about the Father's eternal counsel and directs the proclamation of the kingdom, so, his word is to be obeyed. His servants 'shine as lights in the world' (Phil. 2:15).

We may further open up what it meant for Paul to preach the kingdom by reference back to volume one of his treatise, the Gospel of Luke. The song of Zacharias well expresses what Paul was eager to share with the Jews in Rome (1:68-80). Jesus is the way of God's salvation for all people (2:30-32); the kingdom has come near to or upon those to whom Paul has gone (cf. 1:9; 11:20); the King has been among them (17:21). Paul has seen the kingdom opened up to all believers (13:29). He has seen the chaotic nature of human kingdoms and lifted up his eyes to see redemption coming (21:10, 31).

Into this world where pleasing others, proving oneself, or manipulating a 'place in the sun' for oneself is the dominant view, Paul lives in and proclaims the kingdom or rule of God.

Sequel

Some Jews in Rome believe, but many do not (as John 1:11; 12:40). Even someone rising from the dead would not change this (Luke 16:31). They trust that they are righteous in their own eyes (Luke 18:9) and obey unrighteousness (Rom. 2:8). Paul sees the truth of Isaiah's testimony that Israel refuses to hear the good news of their salvation (Isa. 6:9-10).

He understands that the gospel will now go to Gentiles because they will believe it. Jesus predicted Jewish unbelief using the same Scripture (Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40). Human rejection has not invalidated the message. God always has some who will hear. Paul has already opened up these matters in Romans 9-11.

Persecution of Christians in Rome begins in 64 AD, that is, at the time when Luke concludes his report. It may well be that Paul is acquitted and then travels again. Paul seems to be in Asia again (2 Tim. 4) but this is unclear.

J. A Bengel calls *Acts* 'The victory of the word of God' and adds: 'It began at Jerusalem; it finishes at Rome. Here, O church, thou hast thy pattern; it is thy duty to keep it, and to guard thy deposit' (*Gnomon of NT*) (quoted in Bruce pp. 535f).