

YOU CAN PREACH WITHOUT SAYING A WORD!

Today's Text: Acts 28: 1-11

Extracts:

Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. So *when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow him to live."* But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god....And it happened that the father of Publius [the leading citizen of the island who had entertained Paul's team after that] lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed [Acts 28: 1-9]

There is the story of two young ladies who wanted to bring the good news of Christ to bus riders on one of the overcrowded bus routes in Lagos, Nigeria's business capital. To get a seat on those buses, you had to queue early. One of the girls went ahead of the other and got two seats. She sat on one and used her Bible to reserve the other for her colleague who was way behind on the queue. An elderly woman requested to take the seat with the Bible on it but the young preacher told her it had been taken. Her partner later got in and took the reserved seat. So the elderly woman had to stand. As soon as the bus started moving, the young preacher got up and said, "Brothers and sisters, I have come to talk to you about Jesus." Immediately, people reacted angrily and one passenger stopped her, saying, "We have heard your sermon already and we don't like it!"

Indeed, she had preached without saying a word! Where was the Christ in her when she did not allow an old woman to take the seat that she had reserved for her colleague? Why did she not give up her own seat to somebody that needed it more? What was Christ-like in her conduct? Any of us can be in a similar situation. At home, work, school or place of worship, we come across people whose actions speak louder than their words- for good or for bad. In this week's Bible story, Paul and other prisoners landed safely on an island after escaping death at sea. Without saying a word about himself or Christ, Paul won the hearts and minds of the people who even thought he was a god. There is something for us to learn there from on how we can preach a powerful sermon without saying a word.

1. Background: Paul's ministry at Malta was by signs and wonders

In some countries where noise pollution has not been adequately controlled, even with laws on paper, it is sometimes a wonder why some people have not gone deaf! In Lagos, for example, a city of over 15 million people, virtually every street in the high density areas is a market. Wares are dominated by sermons put on CDs and DVDs by radical evangelical preachers blaring from loud speakers to attract customers or to preach to passersby. Are those sermons meant to convert people to Christ or to make money for pastors cashing in on Nigerians' search for meaning in the face of high unemployment, corruption and terrorist attacks? Why is it that the rising rate of church attendance is not matched by a commensurate drop in corrupt and immoral practices, especially among the political and religious leaders? In some other parts of the world, especially Europe and America, sexual perversity is being packaged as civil rights and condoned even by some churches. *Perhaps the time has come to find a less noisy way to make Christ known to those in dire need of salvation. That is why we need to seek for Spirit-led ways to communicate the message of Christ to the needy. One of such ways is preaching without saying a word. In this week's Bible story, we find an interesting example of that.*

Paul and two hundred and seventy-five other passengers, most of them prisoners being led to Rome by a centurion, had faced instant death in a ferocious storm in the Mediterranean Sea. Through Paul's demonstration of absolute faith in Christ, they were delivered alive even though the ship was completely wrecked [Acts 27: 14-44]. The party landed on an island, which turned out to be Malta, south of Sicily. The island's natives showed unusual kindness by welcoming them with a fire to warm them up as it rained heavily and it was cold [Acts 28: 1-2]. What followed thereafter is a remarkable story that you must hear! It goes thus:

a) *Paul is bitten by a deadly serpent*

At no time are we told that Paul and his fellow "stragglers" introduced themselves to the natives as prisoners or missionaries. I believe that the natives were used to seafarers who stopped by for rest, food and other comforts as they journeyed between Europe and the Middle East. Much more, they might not have heard of Paul or his ministry. Therefore, they could have been dealing with total strangers. That in part could explain why Luke (the author of the book of Acts) saw the gesture of the natives as "unusual kindness."

As Paul gathered some firewood to put in the fire, a viper, agitated by the heat of the fire, came out and fastened itself on his hand. In other words, the poisonous snake bit Paul's hand! He simply shook off the viper from his hand into the fire. The natives said to one another, "No doubt, this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow him to live" [vv. 3-5].

They expected Paul to “swell up or suddenly fall down dead.” But nothing happened to him! After they had waited for a long time and nothing happened to him, they changed their minds about him. They no longer saw him as a murderer but as a god [v. 6]! They would certainly want to know more about him. Meanwhile, Paul had not yet said a word!

When Jesus commissioned His disciples to go into the world “and preach the gospel to every creature,” the emphasis was on the converts’ salvation. But He gave signs that would follow them (and indeed all true believers): in the name of Jesus, they would, among others, take up serpents or drink anything deadly but it would by no means hurt them; they would lay hands on the sick, and they would recover [Mk 16: 15-18]. Paul had only just shown the natives that he had the blood of Jesus in his veins and no serpent could hurt him. For that sign, they already called him a god. They had not seen anything yet!

b) Paul heals the leading citizen’s father

The word soon spread to the ears of Publius, the leading citizen of that island. He invited Paul and his team to his huge estate where he received and entertained them “courteously for three days” [v. 7]. In the process, the word reached Paul’s ears that Publius’ father “lay sick of a fever and dysentery.” Paul went in to him, prayed and laid hands on him and healed him [v. 8]. Perhaps, that was the first time that the people might have heard the name of Jesus mentioned. Paul did not heal by his own name but “by the Jesus whom Paul preaches” [Acts 19: 13].

You can imagine what word-of-mouth advertising can do for a ministry. For example, after Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well, we are told, “the woman left her water-pot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, ‘Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’” The people of that city ran out to meet Him [Jn 4: 27-30]. Many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Jesus “because of the word of the woman who testified.” They then persuaded Him to spend two days with them [vv. 39-40]. They believed even before Jesus opened His mouth. By the time He spoke with them, “many more believed because of His own word” [v. 41].

c) The whole island comes to know of Paul’s gospel

Word quickly spread from Publius’ estate to the whole island about the miraculous healing of his father. Soon, “the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.” Paul and his entourage were bestowed with honours “in many ways.” They spent three months there and when they were leaving, the people provided them with enormous supplies of necessities [Acts 28: 10-11].

When Jesus was sending out seventy [or seventy-two] disciples to go ahead of Him, He told them, “Whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you. And heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” [Lk 10: 8-9]. Paul and his entourage came to the island of Malta. They were well received. Then, *the people saw the hand of God on him by his surviving the snake bite and by the healings that took place*. They spent three months there and you can be sure that that gave Paul the opportunity to say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” *Signs and wonders preceded preaching*. Action, they say, speaks louder than voice. Can you imitate that?

2. You too can preach without saying a word!

On several occasions, Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy [Lk 12: 1]. *Hypocrisy is manifested when what we say does not match what we do*. Can you then imagine a fiery preacher on the pulpit of your church speaking profound words that nobody is paying attention to? Instead, what is passing through his listeners’ minds is “Look who is talking!” For once, why can’t we keep quiet and let what we do speak for us?

You can preach without saying a word through the following ways, among others:

a) *By signs and wonders*

Paul demonstrated a great deal of signs and wonders in the island of Malta. A viper’s bite had no effect on him. He went on to heal the father of the most famous person on that island, and followed it up with others who needed healing. Who would not listen to the gospel that he had to present thereafter?

Jesus demonstrated the use of signs and wonders to bring the gospel home to the people. For example, soon after He had overcome Satan’s temptations in the wilderness, He came into the synagogue in Nazareth to announce the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah and His earthly ministry. His hearers’ first reaction was to want to throw Him over a cliff for blasphemy! But when He went down to Capernaum and cast out demons that recognized who He is, “the report about Him went into every place in the surrounding region.” Thereafter, it was the crowds that “sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them” [Lk 4: 14-42].

Signs and wonders have their limitations because demonic forces can also demonstrate same. For example, until that sorcerer in Samaria had had an encounter with Philip, the people that he astonished with his sorceries had thought that he was “the great power of God” [Acts 8: 5-13]. That is why

Jesus has warned us that true people of God are known by their fruits, not by signs and wonders [Matt. 7: 15-20]. Sooner than later, people can know those false prophets masquerading as mighty people of God. So, go beyond signs and wonders to preach without saying a word.

b) *By your conduct*

As we have said over and over, you may never know yourself better than those who are watching you! That is because there are many things about you that you can NEVER know and the things that you think you have control over can only be for a season. What is your true worth? It cannot be *net worth* [your good self or assets minus your bad self or liabilities] because even banks do owe! It cannot be *self-worth* because that is nothing but your ego! Only God knows your *true worth*. That was why the Psalmist prayed, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret [hidden] faults” [Ps. 19: 12]. Paul told the Philippian church, “The things which you *learned* and *received* and *heard* and *saw* in me, these do, and the peace of God will be with you” [Phil. 4: 9]. See the words in emphasis and you can appreciate how deep conduct can be!

Therefore, before you can preach with your conduct, people will want to be convinced that your *competence* [ability or calling to do the work] is complemented with *compatibility* [ability to work with others in groups or motivate others] and *character* or integrity [ability to be trusted with men, women, money and other resources]. ***If you lack that combination, your silent sermon has no traction.*** When God spoke to Satan with pride about His servant, Job, He said, “There is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil” [Job 1: 8]. Does it then surprise you that when his friends came to console him, they could not utter one word for the first seven days and nights [Job 2: 13]? In fact, they could not speak until he himself had spoken [Job 3: 1]. ***A person of integrity does not speak much to make a point! S(he) may be the only Bible that some people may ever read.***

c) *By your little acts of bravery in defence of your faith*

Those little acts of bravery can speak volumes about the gospel that you want to preach or are already preaching. For example, when Jesus was arrested, His disciples and close associates disappeared. Even Peter that was bold enough to come to the trial hall denied Him thrice when he feared for his life. Therefore, how could we have known where Jesus was buried if a few unknown people had not worked defiantly but silently to affirm their faith in Him? For example, Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews. Although he was a council member, he was “a good and just man” who did not consent to the council’s decision and deed. He was himself also waiting for the kingdom of God

[Lk 23: 50-51]. But after His death, Joseph was the one who went boldly before Pilate to demand His body for burial. With the help of Nicodemus, the Jewish leader that first came to Jesus by night, he buried Jesus in a new tomb [Jn 19: 38-42]. It was another dedicated follower, Mary Magdalene, along with some other dedicated women, who knew the very spot where Jesus was buried. Since Sabbath was near and they could not complete anointing His body with spices before the Sabbath observance began on Friday evening, she was the first to come out that Sunday morning to finish the job- only to discover that Jesus had risen [Lk 23: 55-24: 4]! Today, her story is an essential part of the gospel.

3. Conclusion: Jesus converted a centurion without saying a word!

When Jesus was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, they testified falsely against Him but *He kept silent* [Matt. 26:57-63]. Then they brought Him before Pilate, the Roman governor and *He answered nothing*. Perplexed, the governor asked Him, “Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?” We are told, “But *He answered him not one word*” [Matt. 27: 12-14]. Even when Pilate gave Herod the privilege to “try” Jesus since Galilee fell within his jurisdiction, he questioned Jesus “with many words, but *He answered him nothing*” [Lk 23: 1-9]. The centurion, the Roman officer who led the crucifixion squad, witnessed most of those scenes. He remained on Mount Calvary after Jesus had been crucified. When he and those with him who were guarding Him saw what had happened, they feared greatly, saying, “Truly, this was the Son of God!” [Matt. 27: 51-54]. Do you know the impact of that experience on those Roman soldiers when they came among their colleagues later? Do you know their roles in getting the body of Jesus properly buried while those of the two thieves on either side of Him remain unaccounted for to date? Yet, Jesus did not say a word to that centurion.

Don’t underrate the impact you can make on unbelievers by your silent ministry. Nobody may know what you are doing but God does. Unbelievers are watching you and they are anxious to meet your Master on account of your positive influence on their lives. Don’t underrate it and don’t blow it.

You can preach without saying a word!