

Witnesses sought
Bible reading: Acts 22.17-30



“The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard.” Acts 22.14-15

INCIDENT HERE — WITNESSES SOUGHT. You used to see police notices like that by the side of the road— trying to get to the bottom of a road accident, or an assault. To be a witness, you have to have seen something: the police are not interested in your theories or opinions. On the other hand, you don't have to have a global overview of the whole story — in fact it's probably better if you don't. The police need to find people who can testify (bear witness) to what it was possible to see from one particular view-point — which may be different from what other people saw. It's up to the police (or the judge) to piece together the whole story.

To be a witness, you also need to be prepared to speak out — to repeat your story to the police, to stand up in court (if necessary) and swear to what you have seen — to face up to cross-examination or hostile questioning. (That's why the same Greek word *martus* means both 'witness' and 'martyr': 22.22). *Seeing* and *speaking* are both essential aspects of witness.

Paul is now firmly in the hands of the Roman army — who had the unenviable task of policing the unruly population of Judea. (Ten years later, the whole region erupted into open revolt — you can feel some of the tensions in Paul's interactions with the Romans.) He's on the steps (21.40) that lead from the Temple court directly into the Antonia barracks, built onto the corner of the Temple to give the army a commanding view over what was going on in the Temple courts below. The photo (thanks Mandy!) shows the famous scale model of the Temple in the Israel Museum, with the inner court and the Holy of Holies on the left, and the four towers of the Antonia on the right.

If you look carefully, you can see a low stone barrier marking the left-hand edge of the Court of the Gentiles. Gentiles were forbidden to cross this line on pain of death. There was a rumour circulating in the crowd that Paul had taken one of his Gentile friends into the inner courts (21.27-30). If he had, he would have been subject to the death penalty, upheld by Roman law. No wonder the crowd erupts when he mentions the word 'Gentiles' (22.21). It's a touchy subject — especially here.

And it's here, in this precarious half-in, half-out situation, that Paul begins to learn the meaning of his calling to be a witness. He's been a missionary for maybe twenty years, fearlessly testifying to his faith all around the eastern Mediterranean, planting churches and watching them grow. He's got plans to travel west, to Rome and even to Spain (Romans 15.23-24). He firmly believes that God has called him to proclaim the good news of God's grace to Gentiles as well as Jews (22.17-21).

But now? He's been 'rescued' by the Roman army from the fury of the crowd — but in many ways that means falling out of the frying pan into the fire. The army has its own way of dealing with suspected terrorists (21.38). Anyone who causes as much trouble as Paul must have done *something* wrong — so the obvious way to find out is to flog him. This was a routine method of interrogation for witnesses in a court of law — unless you had citizen rights. It's at this point that Paul decides to play his trump card and reveal to the horrified centurion that he has arrested a Roman citizen (22.25-26). There's a farcical touch about the whole scene, as the embarrassed tribune halts the interrogation — but still doesn't release Paul.

Paul will remain in Roman custody for the rest of Acts — losing his prized independence, moved about like a parcel, conveniently forgotten in prison, fighting to preserve his dignity — but still a witness. His testimony is now the testimony of Paul the prisoner rather than Paul the missionary — his whole story is 'Exhibit A'. No wonder he goes back over the story again and again, testing the links, reliving those dramatic moments of vision that sent him off on his journeys. Was it all true? Did I imagine it? And finding, underneath all the confusion, solid rock: 'He said to me, Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles'. As a friend said to me many years ago, 'God leads us into some strange places sometimes — but where he leads, he always provides.'

God bless, Loveday.

Just come across this lovely *Reflection from lockdown* on the Chester Diocese website:

<https://www.chester.anglican.org/news/a-reflection-from-lockdown.php>