

Following the Way
Bible reading: Acts 24.1-16



“We have found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” Acts 24.5

A friend once asked me to go to court with her as a “McKenzie Friend”. A McKenzie friend doesn’t have to have any legal training, but can sit beside you a court of law taking notes and quietly giving advice. My friend was fighting for custody of her daughter and was told that the other side would not have legal representation in court. But guess what? It turned out they did have a solicitor, who was much more savvy about the whole legal thing than either my friend or me. The solicitor appeared to be on first-name terms with the judge, talked the right language, understood all the legal shorthand — generally felt at home in court and commanded the floor. Unlike us! I felt my main contribution was to keep asking politely what all the jargon meant, because we didn’t have a clue. But more importantly, my job was just being there, sitting quietly beside my friend and reminding her of the person she really was, whatever other people might say. (I’m glad to say the judge was scrupulously even-handed and came up with a solution that was fair to all concerned.)

That’s a bit like Paul’s situation in this passage. On the one side are the men in suits — an official deputation from Jerusalem, an expensive barrister, the best that money can buy. On the other side is the prisoner,

wearing the clothes he stands up in (he didn't expect to be arrested that day he set out for the temple), conducting his own defence.

It's hard to believe it's only twelve days since Paul left Caesarea to go up to Jerusalem (v.11 — see 21.15-16). Now he's back, not with his friends but in Roman custody, facing a formal hearing in the governor's palace, which dominated the seafront (see the reconstruction above: you can still see the ruins on the rocks). In Jerusalem, he was on home ground, in a Jewish city where the Romans were very obviously an occupying force, perched rather nervously on the outside of the Temple. In Caesarea, he's in a much more Roman world, the seat of imperial power and Roman culture in the province. You can still see the "arena", the sandy track of the hippodrome, right next to the palace. (Maybe this is what Paul had in mind when he looked back over his life and said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" — 2 Tim 4.7).

Tertullus certainly knows how to butter up the governor! Felix was actually a bit of a disaster as a governor of Judea: according to the Roman historian Josephus, it was under Felix that the province began to slide into a state of anarchy that would eventually lead to open revolt. But you wouldn't know that from this piece of outrageous flattery. And like all orators he's good at putting up a smokescreen, implying that it's Paul who's at fault, doing exactly what all Roman governors feared most (and what Felix is actually doing), "stirring up civic unrest (*stasis*)" everywhere he goes (v.5). You have to read the speech quite carefully to sift out the one concrete — and dangerous — charge: "He even tried to profane the Temple" (v.6). That (as we saw on Tuesday) was a capital offence, upheld in Roman law. but Luke makes sure we know that Paul was not guilty on that one (vv.17-19, cf. 21.28-29).

What do you do when you're on your own, up against a toxic cloud of innuendo and false charges? Paul goes back to basics. This is what happened, he says, and this is why. All I have done, all I have ever wanted to do, is to follow the logic of my faith — the faith I share with my ancestors and millions of my people. *I worship the God of our*

ancestors. I believe the law and the prophets. I have hope in God — just the same as them (vv.14-15). But all of this I do *according to the Way, which they call a sect*. They call it one thing, but to me it's *The Way*, the way to life, the way God is calling me to follow, the only way I can live my life with integrity. This is the Way that sharpens my conscience and makes me ever more aware of the duty I owe to God and my neighbour (v.16). What's at stake in these final defence speeches at the end of Acts is the validity of the whole way of life that Paul has chosen to follow. That's why Paul keeps going back to the original vision, testing the links, checking the direction. Ultimately, being a witness means putting your whole life on the stand. Like Martin Luther, Paul says, Here I stand — I can do no other. Or in the words of 1 Peter:

*“Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.
Always be ready to make your defence to anyone
who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” 1 Peter 3.14-16*

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>