

The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!' Acts 22.22.

The prophecy of Agabus who took St Paul's belt and tied his hands came to pass sooner than anyone expected. Having arrived in Jerusalem, Paul went into the great Temple where he was set upon by a mob who accused him of turning people away from their ancient Jewish religion, Acts 22.27-28, p1118 ... It soon became a full-scale riot screaming for Paul's blood, vv30-32... Even the Roman commander had to step in, vv33-36...

The Roman commander thought Paul was an Egyptian terrorist who had resurfaced. (We know about this man from the Jewish historian, Josephus. Josephus hated Christians, but his history parallels many of the events in Acts. It's important for us to know that Acts is not made up, but confirmed by outside, hostile sources). Far from being an Egyptian terrorist, Paul announced that he was a Jew and asked to address the crowd. (You've got to admire his guts, haven't you?) In his speech he explained that he was a good Jew who loved the Law of Moses, 22.3... So zealous for the Law was he that he persecuted Christians, until one day he met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. The crowd listened to all this in silence, until in v21 he said: 'Then the Lord said, Go, I'm sending you to the Gentiles'. They went berserk, and screamed in v22: 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!'

Goodness, gracious! What was so wrong about saying *that*? They were prepared to *kill* a man, a fellow Jew, because he had the temerity to say that he felt called to go to the *Gentiles*. Gentiles were scum to Jews.

But the hysterical mob were having none of it. 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!' That's *terrible* language, real murderous hate. But it's not isolated. They said the same of Jesus when the mob shouted at Pontius Pilate, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' But, as the old hymn says, 'Why? What hath my Lord done?' Jesus healed people, raised their dead, brought new hope to those weighed down by their guilty past, reached out to lepers and other social outcasts. Why such hatred? 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!' And at Calvary they *did* rid the earth of him, or, so they thought until Easter.

And ever since the world has been shouting at Christians, 'Rid the earth of them! They are not fit to live!' They killed Jesus. They stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death. Who knows how many Christians were fed to the lions in the Roman empire? And it is *still* happening, in even bigger numbers. Richard Dawkins, Peter Atkins (the Prof of Chemistry at Oxford), Sam Harris all scream that Christians are 'stupid'. (That's a favourite word of theirs. Their bad manners border on the hysteria of the mob shouting for Paul's death.) When Keith Ward was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford by the Queen, Prof Dawkins in his usual charming way wrote to the newspaper calling for his resignation on the grounds that there was no such subject as theology and that Keith Ward was a particularly stupid example of theologian. Theologians are bad people because they encourage this vicious, destructive religious virus which has done so much harm in the world. Get them out of the universities! Rid the earth of them!

That violent language and thought become violent *action* in

certain countries. In Dec 2007 and August 2008 120 Christians were killed by Hindu fundamentalists in the Indian state of Orissa. 'Rid the earth of them! They are not fit to live!' In Nigeria where there is Sharia law 12 churches have been burned since 26 July this year and a number of Christians killed in anti-Christian violence. Pastor George Orjih was beheaded by Islamist militants. On 1 August a mob of more than 800 Muslims raided a Christian settlement in Gojra, Pakistan. Homes were looted and at least 50 houses burned down. Minhas Hameed's 75-year old father was the first to be shot dead. Later six members of Hameed's family were burned to death.

Under the so-called Apostasy Laws you can convert to Islam, but you can't convert from Islam to Christianity. Saudi Arabian Christian Fatima had her tongue cut out and was burnt to death by a member of her own family when they discovered she had left Islam and come to Christ. Mohammad Abbad was about to lose his wife and two children, when his own father reported him to the police for leaving Islam to follow Jesus Christ. Mohammad and his family have now fled the country. 'Rid the earth of them! They are not fit to live!'

And in a mild but just as insistent way the secular authorities in our own country are trying every way they can to remove Christianity from our schools and public life, even though 73% of the population claim to be Christian. 'Rid the earth of these Christians! They are not fit to live!'

So what are we to do about all this? First of all, realise what is going on, and stand up for Jesus. Don't be frightened to call yourself a Christian. That's your witness. Second, pray

for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted in places like Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia. Third, pray for our own country, for our Queen who is a committed Christian. Pray for our politicians. Pray for the conversion of Richard Dawkins, Peter Atkins, Sam Harris. Stranger things have happened! Didn't it happen to Saul on the Damascus Road? Jesus was stronger than Saul the persecuting fanatic, and Jesus is stronger than Dawkins and the secularists. More Chinese are Christians than are members of the Chinese Communist Party!

And fourth, take heart. The fact that so many people - secularists, writers, other faiths - get so hysterical about Christians shews us that they are bothered. What wound those Jews up against Paul was all lies. Paul never told people to ignore the Law of Moses. In fact he claimed (as Jesus himself claimed) that Jesus was the *fulfilment* of the Law. And as to going to the Gentiles, didn't God promise in *Gen 12.2-3* that through Abraham *all* the peoples of the earth would be blessed? Didn't Isaiah say that Israel would be a light to the *Gentiles*? If you think it's hard to be a Christian today, remember they killed Jesus, *and Peter, and Paul*. People are bothered by Jesus, because he's the truth and they don't like the truth. It's not that people don't *believe*. It's that they're in *denial*. It's hands over the ears and 'la, la, la, I can't hear you'. People will go to any length not to face the truth: 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live'. People may not *want* Jesus, but they certainly *need* him. The violent reaction to Jesus over the centuries shews us we're on to a winner. You see, if he's not mad, and he's not bad, what is he?