

But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Acts 23.16.

Isn't it great to be back to normal after all the Christmas confusion? So where was I in Acts before I was so rudely interrupted? You'll remember that after his third missionary journey, Paul ignored the warnings of his friends and insisted on going up to Jerusalem. The friends were right. It wasn't long before the Jewish mob was whipped up into such a frenzy at Paul's presence in the city that the Roman commander had to rescue him. It is very strange how such good people as Paul (and Jesus himself) can cause such violent reactions. What does that say of us human beings?

And what was Paul's 'crime'? He made it clear in 23.6 on p1120 that 'he was on trial because of his hope in the resurrection of the dead'. How can you be on trial because of your belief in the resurrection? What strange beings we are that we want to kill men of love like Jesus and Paul, and take people to court for believing in the resurrection!

23.12 tells us that things were getting desperate for Paul's enemies. They had cooked up a plan to ambush him once they could trick the Roman commander into bringing him before the Jewish religious court, the Sanhedrin, again, vv12-15... But the plan was foiled because Paul's sisters' son had got wind of it. He told Paul who told the Roman officer, vv16-22...

God was clearly watching over Paul. We should remember that he is watching over each of us also. If it's difficult to be a real Christian today in our PC society with its nice-sounding but lethal equality and inclusive agenda, it was

difficult then. God has been resisted ever since Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God who told them not to eat the apple. We've always resisted God. That's why we killed Jesus.

Anyway, it was Paul's sister's son who passed the word on about the ambush. Now I don't know about you, but I find that very striking: Paul's *sister*. Somehow, I can't imagine Paul having a sister, can you? We've been brought up to think of Paul as a very austere, serious-minded person, a bit anti-women in fact. Is that the impression you have? And yet when I read the NT I discover a Paul who is adored by the people. The elders from Ephesus *wept* when he left them for the last time. His many friends were so concerned about him that they *begged* him not to go up to Jerusalem. He inspired incredible loyalty from people like Timothy, Silas, Barnabas, Epaphroditus. Look on p 1142, *Rom16* where he lists all the people he wants to thank. He had tons of friends, and many of them were women.

And now here in *Acts 23.16* we see him as a family man. He has a sister. What was her name? What was the nephew's name? We just don't know. Were they Christians also? In those days, as in some Muslim countries today, many who became Christians were shunned by their families for betraying their culture.

Whether this nephew was a Christian or not, he risked his life for his uncle. 'Uncle Paul'! There's a ring to that!

This verse helps us to see Paul as a real person with real relations and friends, like us. It also helps to remind us that the whole point of Christianity is relationships, people, community. It isn't an -ism, or an ideology. Christianity is just *The Way*. It's following Jesus, and following him *with*

other people. In 1923 a Jewish mystic called Martin Buber published a famous book simply called *I and Thou*. He said that 'all life is meeting'. That's a very penetrating insight.

When we come to church, it isn't like coming to the pictures where you just watch the film and don't engage with the other people in the cinema. You come here to meet. As you hear God speaking to you from the Bible, you meet the living Lord Jesus. My prayer for St Paul's church is not that we grow *numerically* but that you grow *spiritually* as you come closer to Jesus who died and rose for you. You come here to meet Jesus as he speaks from scripture, and you come to meet each other.

We gather now around this holy table. It's communion. Communion speaks of union. Communion *also* speaks of community. I love the way so many people are friends with each *because of* St Paul's. As we reach out to God, so we reach out to each other. So don't leave today without finding out someone's name. You make the first move. Didn't God make the first move to you?

And we relate to each other on an equality. The one thing we are all aware of here is that we are all sinners. No-one here has anything over anyone else. In this church community we can trust each other, and trust these days is a very rare commodity, I'm afraid. It's a family here. We're here for each other. You can feel safe, wanted, and valued. In Christ, around this table, we are all on a level, because high or low to the *world*, we're all sinners. We're all kneeling in repentance at the foot of the Cross. We have that in common, *and* our need of Christ who alone can cleanse us, forgive us and give us new hope and a new beginning. Here, we're all one in Christ.