

From morning till evening [Paul] explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Acts 28.23.

And so, exactly two full years later, we come now to the end of our journey through *Acts*. It began in Jerusalem and ended in Rome. If you can think back to what I said in May, 2008, that is what *Acts* is about: the working out of Jesus' command at 1.8: 'you [disciples] will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'. The last chapters tell of Paul's arrest on trumped-up charges by the Jews, his appeal to Caesar which required his being shipped to Rome, the storm *en route*, and now his final journey from Malta to Sicily, and from there to Puteoli, or modern-day Pozzuoli at the northern end of the magnificent Bay of Naples. From there Paul joined the famous Appian Way which was the road from Brindisi to Rome. It is the details that are fascinating in Luke's account. We learn that the ship was called the *Dioskouroi*, or the Heavenly Twins, ie Castor and Pollux, the patrons of navigation. Paul went to the Forum of Appius on the Appian Way and the Three Taverns mentioned by Horace and Cicero, 28.11-15...

But now Paul was finally in Rome. Behind his unfair arrest on trumped-up charges by the malicious Jewish mob; behind his appeal to Caesar and the terrible the 14-day storm at sea, had been a providential God whose plan was to get this extraordinary man to the very centre of the Roman empire where he could witness to Jesus Christ. Very often events in our own personal lives seem senseless. Faith is trusting that God sees the bigger picture and has other and better plans.

V16 tells us that Paul was held under house-arrest for two years, v16...and v28... But what finally happened to him? Was he executed? Certainly *tradition* says that, but the NT does not tell us. Why not? because *Acts* is not about Paul. It is about Jesus Christ. The last verse of *Acts* is about Jesus, not Paul.

And that is what I want to say today. Let's go back to v15. Paul met his brother Christians on the Appian Way... And then, having arrived in Rome, just three days later he called the Jews (his *fellow Jews*) to put them in the picture, v17... V20 gets to the crux: he was arrested by malicious Jews because he dared to claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. The coming of the Messiah was 'the hope of Israel', v20...

And then Paul argued from the OT (known to Jews rather clumsily as 'The Law, the Prophets and the Writings') that Jesus was in fact the Messiah promised in the OT. He did this from dawn till dusk, v23... Some believed, some didn't.

Now why am I telling you all this historical stuff? What use is this to you? What an inspiration Paul is! Here he was, under arrest on trumped-up charges from the Jews. What did he do? He called the Jews in Rome to meet him, *not* to wriggle out of his predicament, but to tell them about Jesus! He tried to convince them *not* of his innocence, but of Jesus as their Messiah, v23... What a man! When he was in prison earlier in Philippi, he used the opportunity to tell the other prisoners of Jesus. He even converted the gaoler! This man isn't into preaching for the money. It isn't a 9 to 5 job for him. He's never off duty. Even under arrest he is talking about Jesus. That's why he famously wrote to the Philippians, 'For me to

live is *Christ* (1.21). Jesus is his whole life. He lived Christ every hour of every day, even when under arrest. It is Paul's integrity and clarity which shine through. It's powerful.

We have a very deep problem in today's society, and it centres on this notion of Integrity. There are a hundred reasons why people are disenchanted with politics, but chief among them is this thing called Integrity. Because all sides seem to be struggling to occupy what is called the centre-ground; because politicians are anxious to tell us what they think we want to hear, we don't *really* know what they actually stand for. If you're Labour, just be Labour. If you're Tory, be Tory, but please don't pretend, simply to please us.

And it's even worse in the Church. We're so frightened of being laughed at; so worried about being sneered at on Oxbridge High Tables; so anxious to please Voltaire and his modern-day version, Richard Dawkins, that we have jettisoned all the so-called difficult bits of the Bible like Jesus being both God and man at the same time, Jesus walking on the water, Jesus being raised from the dead, that we have nothing left of the original message. I wouldn't mind this approach if the people were now flocking to church, but they are not. And why not? because people can tell when a salesman doesn't believe in his product. People can tell when someone lacks integrity.

The modern churchman is so frightened of 'offending' people that we have constructed a homogenised thing called 'religion' which says that all religions are essentially the same but with minor cultural differences. I suppose that includes Inca child-sacrifice. In this BBC 'Thought for the

Day' religion, you can take or leave Jesus. It doesn't matter.

Well, that's all very dandy, but it isn't the Bible. You are entitled not to believe the Bible, but you are *not* entitled to rewrite it. Again, it comes down to Integrity.

Paul didn't say to the Jews, 'Listen, chaps, I believe in this Jesus, but it doesn't matter whether you do'. No. He argued *passionately* that Jesus was essential, as the full revelation of God, and as the only Saviour. Reject him, and you are doomed. Now some believed, and some didn't, but it was hard to miss Paul's urgency, his conviction and integrity.

For obvious reasons I don't agree with Islam, but I have to say that I admire immensely the Muslims' sense of conviction. They may be misguided. There may even be fear in some of them. Who knows? But I do admire the fact that they don't care whether you like what they believe.

We Christians, by contrast, seem so weak and feeble and lily-livered. *If* you believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, get up and say it. Don't try to please Voltaire or Richard Dawkins. Who are they anyway? Say your piece. Many won't agree with you. They didn't agree with Paul, but at least they will see your integrity. Christians don't need to be aggressive, but Paul tells us to speak the truth in love.

*Acts* ends with four words in Greek: 'with all boldness unhindered', v31... Have the courage of your convictions. You won't win everyone, but if we Christians say what we believe, at least we shall have *respect*. Being frightened is closing churches down. Speaking of Jesus *boldly* makes them grow.