

Then Paul made his defence: 'I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar.'
Acts 25.8.

Things were now getting silly with Paul. All he had done was to bring some famine relief for the poor in Jerusalem but he had been accused of all sorts by the Jewish leaders and now found himself (as a Roman citizen) in the Roman judicial system. Unfortunately for Paul there was a change of Governor in the middle of all this. Felix the wily politician had seen through Paul's enemies, but this new Governor, Festus, was inexperienced. Here now was their chance to try it on with the new boss still only in his first week, p1122, 25.1-5...

Paul knew it was all lies and they could prove nothing, vv7-8... The Jewish leaders were out for his blood; he must not fall into their hands, or let them trick the new Governor. Paul did trust Roman justice. Let Rome decide, he concluded. And so he made the momentous decision to exercise the most ancient right of a Roman citizen, the so-called *provocation*, the right to appeal to the *Populus Romanus*. He uttered those famous words: *Caesarem appello*, I appeal to Caesar. Festus was mightily relieved to be rid of this problem, and Paul was glad to be in safer hands *and* to have the opportunity to preach Jesus in the very hub of empire, in Rome itself, the Eternal City. It's an irony, however, that the Caesar he appealed to was Nero, the first emperor to persecute Christians, but that happened only at the end of his inglorious reign, vv10-12...

Well, that's what happened. But I keep coming back to this nagging question, 'But why did it happen at all?' Why this hatred? What had Paul actually done that was so wrong? It was

blind hatred with no substance. They had no proof. Paul summed it up well in v8... Soon we shall be in Holy Week, and we must ask the same question. The hymn asks, 'Why? what hath my Lord done?' They said that Jesus wanted to be king, but there was no evidence that he ever wanted to kick the Romans out or oust Pontius Pilate. It was very probably the fact that he *didn't* want to see the Romans off that made Judas Iscariot betray him. Jesus certainly did not believe in swords and violence. So, 'Why? What hath my Lord done?'

What harm are Christians doing today in Muslim countries and in Hindu Orissa in India that they must be suppressed, burnt out of their homes and even killed? What harm are Christians doing in our own society that they must always be mocked and misrepresented in our media and soap operas?

Because we live in a liberal, progressive society which never stops using the word 'tolerant', we have been lulled into thinking that the clash which Jesus, Paul, and Christians in other societies experienced, doesn't apply to us. Don't kid yourselves. Just the other day we heard how the Government intended to impose their brand of sex education on all schools. Although atheist teachers can withdraw from school assemblies on grounds of conscience, *all* teachers will be compelled to teach that same-sex relationships, cohabitation and marriage are equal, and that abortion is OK. There is to be no conscience clause. Now in the event faith communities caused the Government to include an amendment which excused faith-schools, but that does not cover teachers in non-faith schools. But even that amendment has caused the liberal intelligentsia

to squeal in self-righteous anger. It's a funny tolerance which has to be enforced, isn't it? Force them to be free!

We do not live in a liberal democracy. It's just that the opposition to Christ is a more subtle here than in Pakistan or the old Roman Empire. The world and Christ are two different things and they clash. By 'the world' I mean life lived without God, where man, not God, is at the centre.

So how, for instance, do we judge whether you are a success? By the size of your bank account, your car(s), house, job? Or by whether you are a good person? You see, there are two different world views at work here, aren't there? We're in Lent now. How could the world with its rampant consumerism and where no-one ever owns up to anything, be more different? Who's owning up for what went on at Staffordshire Hospital? Repentance? Self-denial in a consumerist society?

Soon it will be Easter with the Cross right at the centre. And what does the Cross represent but self-sacrificing love? Jesus is about yielding, and yet the world runs on aggression, assertiveness, getting your rights and entitlements. Where does yielding fit in there? The world tells us to look out for yourself, while Jesus told us *first* to seek God's kingdom.

Christ and the world are two very different things. We are told to live *in* the world, but not to be *of* it. So what do our silly bishops and theologians do? They try to suck up to the world. We've been doing this ever since Voltaire in the 18thC mocked Christianity. So let's rewrite the Bible to make it more acceptable to the world. In 1820 Thomas Jefferson the 3rd US President wrote his own version of the gospels which left out

all Christ's miracles. We're used to church leaders caving in to secularism, but last week they wrote a letter to *The Times* demanding to solemnise civil partnerships in church buildings. The trendy equality agenda meant more to them than the Bible!

So, no, Paul had committed no crime. But actually he had committed the greatest crime of all. By proclaiming loud and clear Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, he had dared to push man off his throne, away from the centre, to make room for Jesus the rightful occupant. The world can cope with a neutered Jesus, a Jesus who doesn't do miracles and can't rise from the dead; the world can cope with a dead Jesus who once said some nice things. But a Jesus who is still alive, who can walk on water and will return as judge is scary.

It's a funny world that would murder on a Cross the purest and most loving man who ever lived. But from that Cross he silently but powerfully condemns the world with its upside priorities and values. People have always been selfish. They know that Jesus doesn't approve. They know he condemns them. Without saying a word, he makes them feel bad about themselves, because deep down, we all know that Jesus, the King of love, is right. But we don't want to hear that. So we killed him, and we rubbish anyone who sticks up for him. That's why they had to kill Paul. And they're still killing Christians abroad who stand up for Jesus, and trying to make life difficult for Christians in our own country. If only we would just shut up and let them get on with their lives as they think fit. But Jesus is *Lord*, and he *must* reign until he has put all enemies under his feet, and the *last* enemy to be destroyed is death.