

## ACTS 25-28

After defending himself against accusations by Jewish religious leaders and their supporters, Paul appeals to be tried in Rome (on the basis of his citizenship), believing he will get a fairer trial this way (as well as hoping to get to Rome as part of his missionary journeys).

1) In his defence before Festus, Agrippa and Bernice, Paul highlights his supreme religious faithfulness as a Pharisaic Jew, his experience of divine revelation of the risen Christ, and the essence of his message to Jew and Gentile.

To the Gentiles he preaches a turning from darkness to light, from Satan to God in order to receive forgiveness of sins and sanctification by faith in Jesus as Messiah. Somehow, faith in Jesus as the Messiah unlocks a capacity to receive Christ's transforming Spirit into one's soul, changing one's orientation and motivation of life.

To the Jews, Paul emphasizes that a) the Messiah had to suffer according to the scriptures (his rejection was a sad, yet predictable response by the people in line with what they had done throughout their history), b) he was raised from the dead as the first, and therefore, c) he "proclaims" (through his Spirit living and speaking through believers) light to both Jews and Gentiles, the light of forgiveness and a new day because hearts and lives are being transformed by the wind and fire of the Spirit.

2) Festus is a shrewd politician who does not get caught by the sinister designs of the Jewish leadership. He wants to understand the charges but he also realizes that there is not enough evidence to punish Paul according to Roman law. Ritual laws of Jewish religion have nothing to do with Roman legal offences. Defiling the temple would be more serious, as would be causing social unrest and revolutionary resistance to Roman authority. Paul keeps clear of these latter offences and focuses his testimony on the question of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews.

3) Paul very clearly sees his call to preach the gospel to the gentiles linked to the refusal of the Jews to accept it. In his letter to the Romans, Paul sees this as part of the larger plan of God (Romans 9-11). This plan is 1) to make room for the Gentiles within the unbelief and temporary exclusion of the Jews, 2) this will then conclude with the final acceptance of the Jews of their true Messiah, and 3) then the Kingdom of God with Jesus as sovereign can be established (at the end of the current historical age as we know it). This will be the second coming.

4) The key issue for the Jews seems to be the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus is already resurrected (before the end of history when all the faithful were believed would be

resurrected), it is a sign that he is, indeed, the Messiah. Resurrection would be divine vindication of the one crucified as a blasphemer and teacher of false religion. For the Jewish leadership to accept all this, they would also have to accept their guilt for having engineered the killing of the one they ought to have defended and worshipped.

5) After a very stormy journey, Paul is finally brought to Rome. There he meets believers, as well as other Jews who have not yet been poisoned by the antagonistic sentiment of the group from Jerusalem. They listen to his version of the faith in their synagogues, and while some believe, many do not. This only further confirms Paul's sense that God is now moving the faith to the Gentiles.

Paul as described in Acts and in his letters, believes he is living in the last age of history. The resurrection of the dead has begun with Jesus, and his Spirit in believers who are called now to become his hands, feet, voice and heart in the world, is the final act toward the establishment of the divine kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. The problem, of course, is that those in power, whether Jew or gentile, do not embrace a kingdom of love-relations between humans-God-creation. Rather, their kingdoms are based on power, greed, fear and violent conquest and domination. There is vast inequality built in between men and women, free and slave, superior and inferior races according to those who rule. There are also massive gaps between the small minority of haves in control and the vast majority of have-nots enslaved to serve them.

Even though we are reading this story two thousand years later, it continues to be a familiar story. While we may not feel like Paul and other early Christians that we are living in the last stages of history as we know it, we do recognize that there are a number of global challenges (climate change, pandemics, economic instability, nuclear threats by rogue nations, etc) that can be catastrophic. And so, like Paul and other early Christians thousands of years ago, we are called anew, for our place and time, to discern how we, together and individually, must claim our identity as the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world.

This also means that like Paul, Peter and others, we must tell our story and learn the biblical story so that we can share it with each other and with a world in sore need of healing toward redemptive wholeness. May we together as the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Corinthians 12: 28) become such a light in the darkness, that people may find their way among us. When love shines among and through us, we witness to a resurrection that has begun in Jesus and is lived as the kingdom fellowship. For all our brokenness, inadequacy and limitations, faith, hope and love keep rising up to proclaim: "God reigns, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit!" Amen.