

Followers of the Way

Using the processes of the world - Paul's trial and appeal to the Emperor

Lynda Rose 30-07-23

Acts 25:1-12

I think the word 'stubborn' comes to mind in relation to Paul. If you remember back, the whole episode of his imprisonment and trial started when Paul returned to Jerusalem and gave the report of his latest missionary trip to James and the elders. But maybe the result wasn't quite what he wanted, because instead of saying, 'Well done! Let's get everyone together and hold a celebration,' they said in effect, 'You know we're a bit worried. People here have been told you're telling Jews overseas to ditch the law ... There's going to be trouble.' And they came up with a plan. Paul could join 4 men under a vow and about to go through the 7 day rite of purification in the temple. Even better, he could pay their costs ... and that might just settle the problem, they thought, by convincing everyone he was a 'good' Jew.

Well, as we all know that didn't work. In fact, the plan went spectacularly wrong. When the 7 days for purification were almost up, Paul was physically attacked by Jews from Asia and accused of 'teaching against our people'. Even worse, they accused him of having brought Trophimus the Ephesian – a Gentile – into the temple; something that, as we all know, was utterly forbidden. In Acts 21 v.31 we read that the mob actually tried to kill him. It sounds, in fact, like it was a full-scale riot and, predictably, the centurions were called. Paul was put under arrest. And that was where the whole sorry saga began.

Paul addressed the crowds from the barracks, before being hauled off to a cell, but that didn't go down too well either, and in order to try and find out what was going on, the tribune in command ordered Paul to be flogged. At which point, Paul dropped his bombshell. Acts 22:25 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?'. Of course it wasn't – to be a Roman citizen really counted for something. It gave position, status, and rights, that had to be respected. So the next day the tribune had Paul brought before the chief priests and the entire council.

Here again, Paul was very canny. Realising that the council was made up of both Sadducees, who denied the resurrection of the dead, and Pharisees, who believed in it, he threw a hand grenade into the debate. Acts 23:6, 'Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.'

Well, entirely predictably, all hell broke loose, and yet again Paul had to be rescued before the enraged council could tear him to pieces. And Paul actually was very good at this – time and again he exploited the law or what people thought, in order to engineer

his chance to share the gospel and bear witness to what God had done. But the really important point to note is that God encourages and upholds him in this. So, following this incident, we read, "That night the Lord stood near him and said, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness in Rome."

That was actually a pretty amazing promise, when you think about it. We know Paul had long wanted to go to Rome, but at that point in his life – in human terms – it must have seemed a bit of a challenge. So I wonder if Paul questioned how God was going to manage this. Did he think that he'd just be released, so that he could rejoin the disciples and begin plans for his next missionary trip? Well, 2000 years on, we know that didn't happen, and that points us to something very profound. If God makes a promise, He *always* fulfils it. No word of God can ever fail. But the fulfilment of that word is always in ways we can't in advance guess, or imagine. Because God is far 'bigger' than anything we can conceive.

Here, a plot was launched on Paul's life and, to save him, the tribune sent him under armed guard to Caesarea to make his case before Felix, the governor. And there Paul languished, in prison, for the next couple of years, until Felix was replaced by a new governor, Festus. At which point, Paul once again found himself summoned to a new hearing, still in Caesarea, to face charges being brought by the Jews. They never give up, do they? And when Festus, who clearly didn't have a clue what was going on, asked Paul if he wanted to go to Jerusalem to appear before him there to answer the charges, Paul once again – as we've just heard in our reading – played, as was his right, the Roman citizen card. Acts 25:10, 'I am appealing to the Emperor's tribunal; this is where I should be tried ... I appeal to the Emperor.'

So in this way – not the most comfortable of situations, when you think about it – God's promise was fulfilled. Paul was going to be sent to Rome, at no cost to himself, with a chance to proclaim the gospel before the Emperor himself. But the point needs also to be made that this didn't need to happen. It was clear the charges being brought against Paul had been manufactured. They were pure fabrication because the Jews didn't like him – there wasn't actually a case to answer, as the Romans knew. If Paul had played it a different way, he could have been released without charge and sent on his way. But Paul rejected the diplomatic route, opting instead for what I suppose you could call maximum exposure. As a Roman citizen, he went above the heads of his accusers and demanded, as was his right, that his case be heard by Caesar.

As I said at the beginning, Paul was stubborn and he wouldn't back down. Using his rights under law, in one fell swoop he moved the conflict up to a whole new level. But what does that mean for us?

I guess the obvious point is that we need to stand our ground fearlessly, claiming our rights under law. But I think that what we see here goes deeper than that. In a very profound way, what happened to Paul focusses the spotlight on good and evil, and the power wielded by both in the world. We know that there's a split – it's sometimes even called a war – between the natural and the spiritual, and the devil is seen as dominating the natural. Jesus called Satan the ruler of this world (John 14:30, 'I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming...'), but I think what stands out is

that Satan's rule is pretty 'patchy'. At no point does he hold ultimate control, and even in 'bondage', it's clear that men and women still yearn after the order lost in Eden ... after God.

Religion, philosophy, law ... the whole social order under which men and women try to live together in peaceful co-existence and harmony ... all bear testimony to the fact that the devil's influence and control is very far from being complete. On the contrary, though we live in a fallen world and our 'natural' inclinations tend towards evil, it's God who remains in control – and God can and does use the things of this world to bring about His purpose. More than that, He is the origin and 'in' the safeguards we have. Our moral order, traditions, values may be imperfect, but they are of God. They are His gift, ahead of our full redemption.

To be clear, the structures developed over time by the world are unquestionably direct result of the Fall, but this doesn't mean that they are evil, per se. Evil is at work through them ... beyond question, but over the centuries they've evolved and been used to try and maintain order and keep chaos at bay, and God is in them. They're a battleground.

Paul used the processes of his world as an avenue that would enable him to proclaim the truth – but those processes, imperfect though they are, had their origins in God, and remained under His sovereignty. Just as Paul did, Christians can and should use the processes and structures of our time – not just where we think they'll work to our advantage, but for the greater good and to stop the devil getting control. In obedience to God, we must resist evil whenever and wherever it manifests.

For too long Christians in this world have tended to see worldly structures as inferior, unGodly, so we've stood apart from them. We're spiritual, we've said, we're too good for that. Wrong. God's charge to Adam and Eve at creation was to rule the world, and that still holds good. Over the last century or so, we've let evil take a hold. So now we're firefight - we're defensive ... as if evil has an absolute right to set the agenda and call the shots. It doesn't. Now is the time for Christians to go on the offensive and reclaim those structures for God – for the sake of the blind and lost who cannot defend or find the way for themselves.

1. Do worldly systems support or work against Christian values?
2. Should we be seeking to use the processes of the world to defend Christian values and belief and, if so, how?
3. Should Christians be trying to 'reclaim' the power structures? And if so, how do we do it?

