REFLECTION, Parish Evensong
Year A, The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Paul's Testimony:
The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth

Acts 26: 25 "I am not out of my mind, but I am speaking the sober truth."

Our reading from Acts this evening steps into one of the great court-room dramas of the Bible. We have the Judgment of Solomon; we have the Trial of Christ Jesus; and (even in the Apocrypha) we have the Judgment of Daniel. But few of them read like a gripping political thriller. The final chapters of Acts are different. Paul the Apostle has travelled to Jerusalem to preach the Gospel of Christ. He is first received warmly, but soon given a warning – there are people here who want you dead. And trouble soon finds Paul.

Agents of the Pharisees, the Jewish group of whom Paul had been a member, stir up a crowd against him, accusing him of turning people against Moses, against the Law and the Prophets, and of preferring the company of Greeks to Jews. There is a riot, and Paul is on the verge of being beaten to death when help arrives from an unlikely

quarter: Lysias the commander of the Roman troops in Jerusalem. He saves Paul by arresting him, while the mob clamours for his release.

Determined to know the truth, Lysias has Paul tortured and interrogated, only for Paul to play a trump card – his Roman citizenship since birth. The commander has unwittingly arrested and imprisoned a Roman citizen, untouchable by law except by his peers, and in desperation, tried to make it anyone else's problem but his own. So he releases Paul, only for him to be brought instead before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious court. Paul accuses the Sanhedrin of false prophecy, recalling the judgment of Ezekiel against the false prophets of Israel, and another riot nearly ensues. Now knowing Paul to be a Roman citizen, Lysias has Paul arrested again for his own safety.

But his enemies plot against him again, to ask for Paul to be recalled before the Sanhedrin to give further testimony, with a plan to lie in wait on the way, and to ensure that he would never arrive alive. Paul finds out, and lets the commander know that his life is at risk, and Paul is smuggled out of prison in the dead of night to the

commander's boss, the Roman Governor, Felix, asking the Governor to sort out the situation.

Paul is in prison again, awaiting trial again. Governor Felix hears the charges against him, but is confused – what exactly has this man done wrong? Yet powerful Jews want him dead. So neither trial is held nor sentence is passed, and Paul is on remand for two years, until Governor Felix is replaced, by Governor Festus. Festus, however, is no more sympathetic to Paul's case then Felix, and suggests that he return to Jerusalem to stand trial there. Of course, Jerusalem is where this whole story started, and Paul knows well he might not survive the journey. And he has in the meantime been given a secret mission by God, to bring the Gospel to the heart of the Empire, to Rome itself. And Paul plays another trump card – as a Roman citizen, he has the right of appeal to the Emperor Nero, and demands his right be recognised.

Festus, like Felix, like Lysias, again would like it to be anyone's problem but his. And sending Paul to Caesar would get this troublesome preacher out of his hair. But what on earth is he to write to Nero, the Emperor of the Roman Empire? A man of volatile passions, who demanded nearly divine honours, the emperor was not to be troubled needlessly. Sending up a man without a

clear case to answer was not a sign of a well-run province, and failing to maintain proper administration was not something which would allow one to retire with an Imperial pension and a villa in one of the sunnier corners of the Empire. He had run out of ideas, until the client-king Agrippa and his sister Bernice came to pay their respects. Festus held the administrative and legal authority, but Agrippa was the royal figurehead maintained in place by Rome to give the regime a veneer of authority, and had one important privilege, to oversee the Jerusalem temple, and to appoint the high priest. What do you think, Agrippa, since he's one of your Pharisees, Festus says. How do I sort this out? And, Agrippa has Paul hauled out of prison, and onto the witness stand, to explain himself once more.

And it is from that witness-stand that we hear the great courtroom speech that we have heard tonight. We heard it in abbreviated form, but the whole of Chapter 26 is worth reading, and reading out loud if you have the chance, imagining yourself to be Paul, once more on trial before the Roman authorities, and given this one crucial opportunity to make his case.

Now, most people who are up before a Court are there to convince the Court to let them off, to find them innocent, to plead mitigation, to set them free. Yet when Paul takes the witness stand, he turns it into a pulpit, not to plead for himself, but to turn the tables on Agrippa and to bring the reality of Christ's death and resurrection, and its significant to Jews, Gentiles, all of humanity, home to the King and his Court. It is a masterful speech.

Paul opens his speech with the first and most important fact: he is a Jew. Not only that, he is a Pharisaic Jew, the strictest and most observant group. And he goes further, to lay down the foundation for his defence, it is because of that Jewish faith that he is on trial. He is, he explains, not on trial for disbelieving, far from it. He is on trial because he truly believes in the Law and the Prophets, and finds them fulfilled in Christ, and it is those who accuse him who have fallen away from trust and faith in God.

But then he makes his great admission – he was not always so. He confesses to the Court that he was once fully opposed to Christ. Backed by the chief priests, who are now seeking his execution, Paul admits that he personally hunted down the early Christians, sending

them to prison and delivering a sentence of death, the same sentence now hanging over Paul.

It is a bold speech. Paul looks directly at the people calling for his head, and at the King who understands their religious zeal, and says: *I know exactly why they want me dead, because I used to be the one leading the mob.*

But Paul then turns to his moment of transformation, the road to Damascus. Paul describes how he, bearing a stack of arrest warrants, each one a potential sentence of death, was stopped in his tracks by a light from heaven, brighter than the midday sun. He and his companions fell to the ground, and a voice spoke to him, asking that piercing question: *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"* At that moment, he meets the Christ he thought was dead, and receives a new commission. Where we might have expected Paul to be punished, he is instead enlisted as a messenger of Christ, and sent to bring the gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles.

Paul looks King Agrippa in the eye and offers his ultimate defence: he is not a rebel or a heretic, but simply a man who could not possibly disobey a direct commission from his God.

Paul reaches the climax of his speech, proclaiming the truth that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead to bring salvation to both Jews and Gentiles. And at this moment, Festus the governor snaps. A dead man coming back to life? A Jewish prisoner claiming to hold the saving truth for the entire Roman Empire? Festus interrupts, shouting from the bench, *"You are out of your mind, Paul!"* But Paul doesn't flinch. He doesn't panic or shout back in anger. With the calm confidence of a man who has placed his life entirely in God's hands, he politely but firmly corrects the governor: *"I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth."*

When we imagine someone taking the witness stand, we often think of those words which are very familiar to us: I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That is what our blockbuster films and Saturday night serials tell us. But I wonder how many of us have pondered what those words really mean – if one is to tell *the whole truth and nothing but the truth*. Paul is not simply recounting his actions, he is actually telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth as he knows it to be true. The truth of the Gospel, the central truth for which the whole world was waiting, and after which the world could never be the same. That Christ Jesus died for

all, that all may live, and be reconciled to God. The ultimate truth, and as proof of this truth, Paul offers himself in evidence. Paul is no longer on trial, but the truth, and Paul is the chief witness.

Having reprimanded Festus, Paul turns his attention back to the man who actually might understand what is really going on here: King Agrippa. Paul knows the king is well-versed in Jewish customs and scripture, and, transforming once more from witness now to advocate, turns to the bench and asks a simple question: *"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."* Agrippa, now himself on the witness stand, and perhaps feeling the heat of the courtroom, deflects the question: *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* In reply, Paul lifts his chained hands and delivers not a rebuke, but a blessing: *"Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."* Paul, having transformed from defendant, to witness, to advocate, now transforms again, to pastor. Paul, even though still in the dock, now concerns himself with the souls of all those holding him captive. Paul speaks with the confidence that comes from knowing that if Christ save a murderous Zealot on the

road to Damascus, he can also save a cynical king in Caesarea. Paul, from a position of apparent abject weakness, is now using his right of defence to change opinion and lives – regardless of the personal cost.

The proceedings are then abruptly brought to a close. The king, his sister and the governor rise and leave the room. Conferring privately, they reach a unanimous verdict: Paul is innocent. How could he be otherwise? But the sentence is no longer theirs to pass. *"This man could have been set free,"* Agrippa notes to Festus, *"if he had not appealed to Caesar."* Paul has played a procedural blinder. By his right of appeal and his Roman citizenship, Paul must – must - be sent to stand before the emperor. There was no abrogating this right, once invoked. But as an adjudged innocent man, and again by his Roman citizenship, Agrippa and Festus dare not allow Paul to suffer the injustice of the mob. His day in Court ensured that Paul would travel with all protection to the heart of the Empire, bringing the Gospel safely to Rome. Paul knew the absolute power of the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and he was prepared to forfeit his own freedom if it meant continuing to be an advocate for the salvation of the world.

How many of us, I wonder, would have followed Paul's example if we found ourselves standing in the dock before Agrippa? Our instinct, when backed into a corner, tends to self-preservation: to defend our reputation, to plead our innocence, and to secure our own release by whatever means necessary. Paul shows us a different approach. Trusting entirely in God, he transforms his moment of peril into an opportunity to advocate for Christ, looking upon his captors not with bitterness or fear, but with a deep longing for their salvation. When we face our own trials, when we feel judged, misunderstood, or trapped by our circumstances, will we look only inward to defend ourselves? Or can we, like Paul, look outward with grace, that those around us might come through us to know Christ?

When we leave this place tonight, we will probably not find ourselves on trial. We are unlikely to be asked to trade our freedom against our faith. That is not the case for many Christians, by the way, who must hide their faith or suffer pain, imprisonment, death. Yet, we will step out into a world that is often just as sceptical, just as pragmatic, and just as quick to dismiss the reality of the resurrection as Festus was in Agrippa's court. In our workplaces, in our communities, and among our friends,

we will encounter moments where our faith is challenged, ridiculed or simply misunderstood. In those moments, we can look to Paul in Caesarea.

And it's important to remember that Paul was not alone. The Spirit was with Paul. Christ promised us in Luke 21, by the Spirit we will be able to find the words and wisdom even to speak before kings and governors, just as Paul did. With the help of the Spirit, we can, when we really need to, when we are really called to, to speak with a calm clarity about our own relationship with Christ. And like Paul, whatever platform is put in front of us, no matter how uncomfortable, no matter how weak we may feel our position is, we can still take that chance to bear witness to the love of Christ.

Therefore, as we step out into the week ahead, I hope that we will not shrink from the witness stands of our everyday lives. Whether in a fleeting conversation, a challenging decision, or a moment of disagreement, I hope that we can choose to see these encounters not as trials to be survived, but as opportunities for witness to be embraced. Let us pray earnestly, therefore, for the courage of Paul; let us ask the Holy Spirit to give us the words to speak the whole truth of the Gospel; and let us look upon everyone we meet, even those who oppose us,

with the same grace with which Christ met his persecutor on the road to Damascus. Let us go forth boldly, offering our words and actions as evidence of Christ's redeeming love, trusting that God will use our witness to change the world around us. **Amen**.