

**Imagine the scene** – a palatial building, a building with a history built for Herod the Great - the King of Judea who ruled as a client of Rome, whom Matthew implicates in the massacre of the innocents ... and who began the building of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in Jerusalem, of which the current Wailing (or Western) Wall remains today ... built by a tyrant, by the time we get to today's reading from Acts Herod's kingdom has been divided on his death among his 3 sons and his sister ... and his son Herod Antipas figures greatly in the trial and crucifixion of Christ ... but one of Herod the Great's major constructions was the palace at Caesarea.

So it is into this palace, by now appropriated as the praetorium for the official business of Rome, a place of intrigue, betrayal, with plotting and murder as part of its history ... into this place that the Apostle Paul is brought to face an inquisition in the company of Festus, the Roman governor of Judea and Herod Agrippa (King Agrippa) grandson of the infamous Herod the Great ...

It seems likely that Paul was brought in in chains, but had not been ill-treated. He had been tried, had appealed to Rome and was judicially now beyond the reach of the Judean's governor or the King. Thus it is an inquisition, not a legal trial. Paul is clearly seen as problematic, as a political threat, but also acknowledged as a man of educated and official background, who is of sufficient significance for this meeting to occur:

1. The might of Rome
2. The power of the Jewish King with his wife
3. The prisoner ... and Agrippa gives Paul the **permission** to speak ... Luke has already written in the Book of Acts an account of Paul's conversion, of his change of name, of heart, of belief ... **we** can read this earlier in the Book of Acts ... but those with real political power in Judea have not heard this story before and so now, as we read this passage from Acts the scene is dramatic because we are privileged to see and hear Paul's personal testimony at the exact moment they do ... we are witnesses to something very special.

It is a stirring declaration of Paul's legitimacy. He tells them:

1. He has lived strictly as a Pharisee. He has been zealous in his persecution of Jesus' followers, whom he considered dangerous blasphemers. He has pursued them to death – even across geographical boundaries. Blindly (a parallel there in today's political world) he has served a dictatorship of harm-imposed rules, not the truth of the Way that God promised to Paul's ancestors.
2. Secondly Paul testifies to the blinding light (literally blinding in his case) that fells him on the road to Damascus ... and to the voice that speaks to him: **'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? ...** Why does he struggle against the truth?
3. He speaks of the commission given directly to him by Christ: **'Go out and be my servant – I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles ... but I am doing this so you will open their eyes and give them the Good News – the chance to turn willingly to the light'** ... Jesus is saying: **"I came to rescue them and now as your eyes are opened you must continue that ministry."**

Paul, blinded without choice by God's light, is now commissioned to spread light amongst all of God's people – Jew and Gentile.

It is surprising that Festus, the Governor, calls him mad? But Paul rejects that accusation – "No, what I say is reasonable, especially to the King (Agrippa) whose background is in the Jewish law and Prophets ... I Paul bring the promise that God gave to our fathers ... open your eyes."

Agrippa had the chance to embrace Paul's truth to free the minds and hearts of his people. Festus, too could have freed Paul physically ... they failed to turn to the light because political power spoke more urgently than the needs of their eternal souls.

**We, on the other hand**, in this only slightly less palatial place, but with our own minds and hearts freed from darkness, can hear and understand the immensity of Paul's testimony to the living Christ. We can give thanks to God for the words from the Book of Acts and thus for knowing and receiving Paul's faithful mission to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ out into the World – from darkness to light.

May we, though we have perhaps only a small part of Paul's faith and courage, continue to play our part by bringing the Word of Christ to the lives of doubters, through our words and our deeds and by receiving the inspiration of St Paul who turned onto the way of Christ and opened it to the sunlight for any who had the courage to follow. He did not fear death or persecution (though he knew only too well what those meant) but he chose to live and teach for as long as the human world allowed because he had so much to reveal about the identity and deity of Christ. For his own part having come to Christ, he did not fear the final journey by the Grace of God.

Amen.