

Acts 23: 1-15

Divide and Conquer!



In today's passage Luke opens the scene with Paul standing before the council, ready to make his defence. "*My brothers,*" he said, "*up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God.*" (23:1). On hearing this statement, the high priest Ananias ordered that Paul be struck in the mouth.

We can sometimes forget that Paul is human like us and not simply some sort of super-hero saint, and like so many of us, Paul has a temper, which for the moment seems to have gotten the better of him. Paul hits back – verbally, of course, "*God will strike you, you whitewashed wall.*" (23.3)

Paul then regains his composure and knowing his audience consisted of both Pharisees and Sadducees decides to throw a cat amongst the pigeons. Addressing his words specifically to the Pharisees. He says he is on trial because "*our hope is in the resurrection of the dead*". Miraculously this puts his fellow Pharisees quite firmly on his side and they immediately latched on to the fact that Paul, as a fellow-Pharisee held a belief that Sadducees denied.

Paul's words on resurrection immediately diverted attention from him to this contentious issue dividing the Jews. And by doing so the Pharisees make an about-turn: "*We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel had spoken to him?*" (23.9)

All their objections are forgotten - the Pharisees, despite their earlier protestations, side with Paul, "their man". It's hardly surprising that a free for all ensued. It got so serious that the tribune, fearing Paul would be torn to pieces, came to his rescue and took him back to the fortress.

The situation must have seemed bleak to Paul. He had been warned over and over again that he would face dire troubles in Jerusalem. He had barely survived three attempts on his life in just a couple of days (21:31; 22:22; 23:10). That his life would end in Jerusalem must have seemed a distinct possibility.

But on one of the darkest nights of his life, Jesus appears to Paul and says, *“Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness in Rome”* (23:11). During this critical moment of Paul’s ministry and life Jesus was there with him as he had been throughout every step of the way giving him the reassurance and courage that he needed in order to carry on. Now we can be confident that Paul will somehow escape this perilous situation, no matter how any twists and turns it may take.

What was true for Paul, is also true for us, we too will come through this perilous time of coronavirus, racial discrimination and climate change. We want a better, fairer, more compassionate world for all God’s people. Paul shows us there’s a place for ‘righteous anger’ even among the saints, so that we too might say: *“we have strived to live our lives with a clear conscience before God”*.

Our hope for a new world order is best summed up in this Franciscan Benediction.

*May God bless you with anger
at injustice, oppression, the exploitation of people and creation
so that you may work for justice, freedom, peace and care of the environment.*

*May God bless you with tears
to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
and turn their pain into joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness
to believe that you can make a difference in the world
so that **you** can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen*

Over the weekend Marcus Rashford (M/C United footballer) wrote to every Member of Parliament describing his personal experience of growing up in poverty on the Wythenshawe Estate. He asked the government to reverse their decision not to extend the free school meals voucher scheme throughout the summer. Sometimes it just takes one person to stand up in order to right a moral wrong. I’ve just heard on the news that the PM has at last reversed his decision, the voucher scheme is to be extended to those children who were most at risk of going hungry due to food poverty.

*“to believe that you can make a difference in the world
so that **you** can do what others claim cannot be done”.*

Every blessing, Linda