

<sup>13</sup> A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. <sup>14</sup> Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. He said: 'There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. <sup>15</sup> When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned. <sup>16</sup> I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over anyone before they have faced their accusers and have had an opportunity to defend themselves against the charges. <sup>17</sup> When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. <sup>18</sup> When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. <sup>19</sup> Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus whom Paul claimed was alive. <sup>20</sup> I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. <sup>21</sup> But when Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.' <sup>22</sup> Then Agrippa said to Festus, 'I would like to hear this man myself.' He replied, 'Tomorrow you will hear him.' <sup>23</sup> The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. <sup>24</sup> Festus said: 'King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. <sup>25</sup> I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. <sup>26</sup> But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. <sup>27</sup> For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him.'

Last week we saw that the new governor Porcius Festus was visiting Jerusalem to get to know the religious leaders there. Strangely enough, getting Paul to come to Jerusalem seemed one of their key objectives with the plan to assassinate him on the way from Caesarea. Perhaps Felix had warned Festus of that plan and so he asked the accusers, the chief priests and elders to come back to Caesarea with him: which also demonstrated who was really in charge. However, Paul appealed to Caesar as a Roman citizen to be tried by Romans and not a kangaroo court of religious bigots who had already reached a guilty verdict based on who Paul was and not what he had done.

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King Agrippa was the son of Herod who was eaten by worms and who was responsible for the death of James the son of Zebedee and Salome -the sister of Mary, and so the cousin of Jesus. As we learnt earlier, his sister Drusilla was married (for a while when it was politically expedient) to the previous governor Felix. Bernice was the king's sister and Drusilla's sister. It was said by Juvenal that she was over fond of him, and had an incestuous relationship with him. She was a widow having married her uncle, another king Herod, and was with her brother now as head of the family. She later had an intimate relationship with Titus – the general who later became emperor after he had put down the Jewish revolt and reduced Jerusalem to rubble. So they were all a fine lot of immoral folk kept on as rulers by the Romans who left much of the civil running of the empire to native kings. The British in India did pretty much the same. Luke tells us that King Agrippa and his sister came to pay their respects to Festus. Sucking up to the Romans was a way to keep themselves in power and while their status was technically superior to Festus, nonetheless, they thought it wisest to make the first move rather than send ambassadors and invite Festus to come to them. The land Agrippa was in charge of was the area around Galilee.

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We now get an explanation why Festus didn't hand over Paul to the Jewish temple rulers. In the interests of fairness and justice, it was not the Roman way to hand over people to be condemned to death merely because of accusations made without a defence being presented. Festus is justifying himself as a fairer judge than the Sanhedrin, who had had plenty of run-ins with the tetrarchs (the four kings ruling Israel after the death of their grandfather King Herod (the one who ordered the slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem). King Agrippa was in dispute with the Temple authorities because they heightened a wall so that the elevated room he built in his palace

adjoining the Temple couldn't be seen – and he couldn't see into the temple complex anymore from his palace. Festus had to sort out this dispute, and that went to Nero to be sorted out, according to Josephus. The western wall that the Temple authorities heightened wasn't taken down as Nero ruled in favour of the Jews. The immorality and venality of these grandsons and granddaughters was well known and so they were as hated by the population as the Romans. However, they were nominally in charge so the Romans had to work with them and hoped that they would keep collecting taxes and maintain civil obedience. But Festus knows full well that they weren't interested in justice and didn't have the Roman mindset that everyone deserved a fair hearing in court, so he wants to explain that he is a fair man, unlike the religious bigots in Jerusalem - which is something King Agrippa might agree upon.

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As a Roman, Festus shows he is a man of action, unlike Felix the procrastinator looking for a bribe. He was astonished that no crime deserving the death penalty was being brought. Instead they talked about religion and a dead man who Paul claimed was alive. Given that Paul was so important to the Jews that he had to be tried and face the death penalty, Festus thought he would be a really dangerous man, only to find that he had been accused of stuff he would have considered as nonsense and unworthy even of his attention. We can see how frustrated Festus is that he had been misled by these Jewish religious leaders and basically has had his time wasted by their barmy accusations on matters of religion that no Roman would consider criminal. Romans tolerated many religions and so long as they didn't cause trouble, they let people do what they liked so far as worshipping their own gods and following their own customs. The majority of Jews however were intolerant of all other religions and got very upset when any of their customs and beliefs were trampled over by both foreigners (gentiles) and Jews who didn't accept the authority of the priesthood. Christians were eroding the priestly power base by denying their authority.

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So far as Festus could make out Paul was no danger to anyone at all. He allowed Paul to make the decision as to where he should stand trial, and Paul made the decision for him. Phew! Festus had managed to settle the matter by letting someone higher up the legal chain make the decision. Caesar had this issue dumped on him, and he probably – we do not know which emperor condemned Paul to death, probably Nero – was as fed up with what he would have thought the ridiculous situation when brought to his attention and did what emperors do – get rid of the problem by executing another troublesome Jew, albeit a Roman citizen from the provinces with no political influence. Thumbs down, and on to the next boring case.

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Events move on in an unexpected direction but gave Paul opportunity to preach the Gospel – all part of God's plan. Surprisingly Agrippa wants to hear from Paul. Perhaps he had heard about Jesus and was curious. In the normal course of events the king wouldn't have attended a meeting with Christians, and this was an opportunity to hear one of the Way's great evangelists to find out why so many were turning to Christ. Agrippa and Bernice also had the opportunity to show off and create some entertainment for themselves, the Roman officers and other local worthies – who would not have ordinarily heard the Gospel either. This is the same Greek mindset seen in Athens – Roman officers, merchants and local landowners who might not be Jewish but from all over the empire, were curious to know about new things and didn't have the closed minds of the ultra-orthodox Jews. Agrippa and Bernice would have dressed up in all their finery.... dressed to impress, while Paul after languishing in prison for two years was likely to be quite shabby. Festus would have told Paul that he was to have an audience with the king and his sister. Paul as ever was ready without needing notice to prepare for this.

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Festus explains to the men present what he has done and why he has done it. He brings Paul forward and asks Agrippa if he can find something to write to Caesar about Paul as he cannot find a crime has been committed that needs to be judged by Caesar. Sending people to Caesar for no good reason reflects badly on Roman governors, and Festus does not want Caesar to be annoyed with him for wasting his time. Nero was not a man any governor would want to annoy with trivialities especially on the preposterous claim that a dead man was alive. Josephus tells us that Porcius Festus died after being governor only two or three years. It isn't revealed what he died of, but was suddenly in AD 62. It appears that in asking not only the king to guide him, but the officers and prominent men of Caesarea for guidance, Festus is man doing the best he can in a situation out of his control and which should have been dealt with by his predecessor. He has been handed a job that he finds needs wisdom and we'll find out next week whether he got any good advice on how to compose his letter to Nero when he sends Paul to Rome.

Luke gives us a lot of detail in this episode... far more than in other incidents. Much of the Old Testament is a narrative about people and events and it can be hard to find something spiritual to highlight from the story. Proverbs 15:22 says *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed.* Today it is fashionable to claim the wisdom of crowds - the idea that large groups of people are collectively smarter than individual experts. However, it was well known in the Greek and Roman world that seeking the advice from many helped find answers. Today we still have juries because of belief in collective wisdom. Councils, parliaments, company boards, church managements all rely on collective wisdom though often one person may dominate and sway judgments to his or her way of thinking. The downside is collective group think where the many are so convinced of their rectitude that they disregard and denigrate any differing views. To some extent the Sadducees and Pharisees had groupthink: they knew they were right and everyone else was wrong because of what previous generations of scholars had pored over and discussed to arrive at a definitive collective view of the law of Moses. The result was law full of detailed things that should be done and should not be done – much like our law – but it was law that lacked love. The whole law of Moses was based on love of God and love of neighbour, but the Sanhedrin had reduced it to a set of rules that involved duties, rites to be performed, motions to go through, things to be avoided; most of which was tedious. There was no joy to be found among these people. In the Gospels the Pharisees are always critical and seem a miserable bunch uninterested to share the joy that a healed man had and instead complained it shouldn't have happened on the sabbath.

Let's sing Amazing grace.