

²² The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" ²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. ²⁵ As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" ²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen." ²⁷ The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. ²⁸ Then the commander said, "I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. ²⁹ Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains. ³⁰ The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.

After Paul had addressed the crowd from the steps of the barracks and told them about his Damascus experience, they were at first silent and attentive, but when he got to the bit where he claimed Jesus said, Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles, the crowd had had enough. It seems that they refused to accept that God spoke to Paul, as he did to Moses and the prophets. It was 450 years since Malachi had said anything that was acknowledged as coming from God. The Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees were as sceptical that God would speak to anyone in their day as so many believers today are sceptical that God still speaks to people. The supernatural is out of the ordinary natural course of events and many refuse to believe that what seemed to be commonplace in the Scriptures is just as likely to be commonplace today, if only the testimonies of those to whom God has spoken are believed.

All over the world there are testimonies of supernatural healings and there are people who have heard the Holy Spirit of Jesus speak to them. We know this to be true, but there will be sceptical people who neither believe that anything new has been revealed by Holy Spirit since the New Testament and nor do they believe in divine healing. Sadly what is outside personal experience is often not deemed believable. If you do not believe that God will answer prayer, it is unlikely that your prayer will be answered. The same applies to healing. We need to have faith that all that Jesus, who is God, spoke about in both Old and New Testaments is true.

When we looked at Mark's Gospel, these verses apply: Mark 22:22-26

²² "If you have faith in God," Jesus answered, ²³ "truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

John 14: 12-14 ¹² "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

Back to the text: the crowd is shouting and starting to get worked up. The Roman commander or tribune is getting nowhere in finding out what Paul had actually done. So he decides to take matters into his own hands and brings Paul in to be interrogated in the Roman manner: flog the accused, whether innocent or guilty and then get them to confess whatever crimes they are supposed to have committed. However when they try to flog Paul, he asks a more junior officer... a centurion, whether it is lawful to flog a Roman citizen before a trial has decided he is guilty. Obviously not! Luke here is showing us first hand how Roman justice worked and what privileges Roman citizens had that were unavailable to lesser folk, like those under Roman occupation who weren't citizens. The centurion asks for clarification from his commander. The commander asks: *Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?* "Yes, I am," he answered. ²⁸ Then the commander said, "I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. ²⁹ Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately.

The soldiers knew that mistreating a Roman citizen would have personal implications for them. Claiming to be following orders wouldn't any good if the commander ordered a flogging... they would all be flogged or even worse executed, if the Roman citizen complained and had friends in high places. Roman soldiers could do pretty much anything to people

in occupied countries with impunity, but Roman citizens were to be granted due process of law and the right to a hearing or trial of sorts.

The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains. ³⁰ The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews.

The only way out for the commander/tribune was to find out if he could find some justification for having put Paul in chains because so far he had hauled Paul out from a hostile crowd in order to calm down the situation by removing an apparent troublemaker, and put him in chains to appease the crowd. This man was doing his duty and trying to cover his back as well. He did what seemed sensible. *So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.*

Paul has his chains removed, but is still in custody. This tribune had the power to summon the Sanhedrin, and they had to obey his orders. Luke is describing the power a Roman officer in charge of the cohorts based in Jerusalem had to summon the most important religious leaders – regardless of what day it was or whether it would be convenient for them to attend. Failure to attend would have consequences, but in this case, the Jewish leaders knew Paul and wanted him dead. Paul was a traitor – sent out to clamp down on Christians, and bring them to Jerusalem for punishment – who switched sides, made many converts, disturbed many Jewish communities throughout Asia, Cyprus and Greece, and had the temerity to come back to the Temple to worship with his Greek friends. We'll see next week how that went!

If this story happened today, what would it look like?

When a mob is roused by someone who the people around find objectionable, what happens? Suppose a Christian finds himself in an area almost exclusively occupied by Muslims, and then tries to enter a mosque to pray, without drawing any attention to himself. If someone then recognises him as a Christian who used to be Muslim, there would be a pretty hostile reaction. It might result in the Christian being jostled, man handled and assaulted, both verbally and physically. The police turn up and arrest the Christian, allegedly for a breach of the peace, when the people attacking him were breaching the peace. As the police take the Christian to the police station, the crowd follows and astonishingly the police officer allows the Christian to address the mob to give his testimony! This just makes matters worse, so the Christian is put in the cells – minus shoelaces, wallet, mobile phone and keys. Then he is brought out to be questioned and the police inspector finds out he is a pretty prominent citizen.. perhaps a solicitor, a magistrate, a barrister or even a judge. The arrested Christian will know the law and the police will be answerable for their actions if there is a complaint, so evidence needs to be obtained. The inspector seeks to get answers from the mosque elders who he summons, and who are keen to come to complain about this convert who under Islamic law is worthy of death!

What is this story saying to us today?

We all have rights under the law to exercise free speech and free movement. Public spaces like open places of worship are open to all, when open. That applies to mosques, synagogues, sikh and hindu temples as well as churches. However how we behave in those places is governed by the rules that apply in those places. Paul had done nothing wrong by entering the Temple in Jerusalem, but he had upset the Sanhedrin by failing to do what they sent him to do and actively sought to undermine their authority. Christians who once were followers of other religions need wisdom in going back into places that formerly welcomed them and now actively detest them. Also if arrested for something of which we are innocent, how do we behave towards the police?

I have been arrested – two officers came to my place of work, and said they wanted to speak to me outside. First they had come to our house at 8am but I had already gone to work. There was a police van outside with another two officers: four in all. I asked what they wanted, and was asked did I know a heroin addict. (He used to come to the soup run and often asked for food or some money). I said yes I knew him. The officer then arrested me for fraud, but refused to say what the fraud was. I was bundled into the van, taken to station, put in a cell and left for a couple of hours. Then the inspector questioned me and it was about some cheques made out to me which I had banked and exchanged for cash, after they were cleared. The addict said he had some decorating for a man, and as he didn't have a bank account (which was true – he only had a post office account into which his benefits were paid without any paying in facility), and had asked the cheques to be made out to me. Apparently the signature on the cheques were forged, and the man only noticed six months later, and complained to the bank and police. This was 1995, when the police were still interested in a forged cheques for £200. The inspector, having heard my side, asked me if I was prepared to give evidence in the prosecution of the heroin addict! So I wrote my statement. What followed was farcical... because I

had been arrested my fingerprints and a photo were taken against my will. They were taken because they had the power to take them and the discretion not to. I was then released at 12.30pm and not offered a lift back to work.. over 2 miles away. The 4 officers from the van were still hanging around when I shown the exit to the Custody Suite, all had wasted their time, including mine when telling me what it was about could have had it all settled in minutes. When the case came before the magistrates months later, the addict pleaded guilty at the last minute so the victim, the witnesses including me, the lawyers all wasted their time. He was fined £100 to be taken out his benefits at a £1 a week, a three month suspended sentence. The victim got a Court order to have his £200 repaid, but it never was. He would have had to get bailiffs (costing money plus court costs) to enforce the order and the addict had no assets to be seized as he lived in a council flat with nothing of any value. Where the bank stood having cashed cheques without checking the signatures was never revealed... banks don't actually check signatures anymore and wash their hands of errors. As an innocent man, now with a police record, I wrote to the Kent Chief Constable to have my finger print and photo records removed. He refused saying he had power to keep them, even though guidance said they should be deleted. Guidance wasn't what the law actually said. The law says that the police had discretion to keep finger print records indefinitely. A few years later, when I was the management accountant for a newspaper wholesaler, there was a much worse cheque fraud. Computer generated cheques using a dot printer posted to the Daily Mail were stolen by a post office employee and ended up being given to a Nigerian lady to pay in after the payee's name had been rubbed out and replaced with her name. In that fraud trial the prosecution had disclosed that I, as the person who had signed the Daily Mail cheques, had been arrested for fraud. The Nigerian lady represented herself and questioned me about that arrest, regarding a couple of cheques with forged signatures, in order to discredit my witness statement. The defence had the apparent right to get police records on any witness giving evidence for the prosecution. She claimed, addressing the jury, that I was an unreliable witness, and the cheques were made out to her, despite the forensic expert previously stating the original wording had been carefully scratched away. She claimed I sent her the cheque for over £30,000. The prosecution asked if I knew her, and then foolishly asked her why I sent her a cheque for such a large amount, to which she just smirked. The bank cashier in Holborn had noticed the cheque had been altered and called the police as the Nigerian lady was paying in £30,000 to her personal account, and she was caught red handed. Apparently she had paid £1,000 to some other Nigerian who altered, rather badly, the payee on a computer printed cheque. While the City of London police sergeant was apologetic about having to disclose my police record (I have never actually seen what it is), the prosecution barrister laughed and said that if she mentioned it, it would make her look even more stupid that she actually was.

These two run ins with Her Majesty's Constabulary altered my opinion of the police. It sunk to a low level as they were incompetent, heavy handed, and altogether completely unsympathetic (in Canterbury) when making an error that could have been fixed in minutes if questions were asked before making an arrest on a false assumption and wasted a morning of my time and four officers.

Could the story make a difference to my life, and if so, how?

Tangling with authorities will often end up badly, as Paul found out later after he appealed to Caesar and was languishing in Caesarea for years waiting for a decision from the governor of Judea and then years in Rome as well waiting for a hearing before Caesar. Paul expected justice: what he got was unfair incarceration for many years, during which time he was able to give the Gospel. Paul was then executed for having the temerity to appeal to Caesar on a matter that had already been settled – Christians, regardless of whether they were Roman citizens or not, had been banished from Rome by the emperor Claudius in AD49. By going to Rome, Paul effectively wrote his own death sentence as banishment meant no one could return, but if they did, they would be executed. Why it took so long to make a decision, we don't know, but justice is often very slow. Perhaps, as was the case in Caesarea, a bribe of some sort was expected to expedite matters in Paul's favour.

Expecting justice from those in power over us is something we should be wary of. The people in charge of justice and law enforcement have their own agendas and make choices as to whether to be just and fair or not. Are we not asked to forgive those who wrong us? Going to law to settle matters needs very careful consideration. Justice will be meted out by God. We who are as guilty of sin as everyone else, have a Saviour who has paid the price, taken the punishment and enables us to join the Father with all the saints in heaven. In God's eyes we can be clothed with the righteousness of Christ, and whatever happens, that security is something we can rely on always.