

Acts 28:1-10 (NIV)

Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.

Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live." But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects.

The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days.

His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him.

When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honoured us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.

Sermon

Introduction

May it please the Court, I am most grateful for this opportunity to sum up the case for the defendant, Paul, whose acts as an apostle, now bring him before Caesar's judgement in Rome.

May I begin by summarising the charges that have been levelled against Paul and other Followers of the Way of Jesus Christ, whom they worship as the risen LORD, that is to say, the son of God, who by the power of the Holy Spirit of God lived on earth, who was raised from death to life and who ascended to heaven to live with God.

And yes, therein lies the first of the five charges. The charge of worshiping one god...

Case for the Prosecution

Romans persecute - I mean prosecute - Christians primarily because the faith is viewed as a subversive, "alien" cult that threatens the stability of the empire by refusing to worship the emperor, undermining traditional state religion (our pax deorum), and fostering social distrust through secrecy. Christians are seen as anti-social for refusing to participate in state rituals; and some behaviours appear to outsiders as decidedly weird - their Eucharist appears to the outsider as cannibalism with a ritual that talks about eating flesh and drinking blood!

It is in respect of these charges that the defendant, Paul, now faces execution. Although I am grateful to my learned friend for the prosecution who has kindly agreed that in the event of a guilty verdict his sentence can be commuted from Damnatio ad bestias in the Coliseum to beheading, on account of his Roman citizenship.

Over the last 6 weeks we have heard first hand witness accounts of the acts of the Apostles of Jesus Christ the risen LORD. I am grateful for those instructing me, messrs Hayes, Gardner, Butterworth & Crookal for their comprehensive and - in my submission - compelling preparation and presentation of the testimonial evidence to support the defence's case that Jesus is alive, he is alive indeed, Halelujah....

Testimony of Luke of Malta which we heard today.

Corroborated by the Centurion, Julius of the Imperial regiment, into whose custody Paul was placed for his journey from Jerusalem to Rome.

You will recall that Paul along with the entire crew and passengers were shipwrecked in a storm off the coast of Malta but all survived, not just the shipwreck but also the vipers and other perils that our greco-roman tales and lore speak of. In fact, Paul himself was bitten by a poisonous snake on arrival on the island but miraculously Paul was able to shake off the venom and suffered no ill effects. And that wasn't the only miracle to be performed during Paul's stay on the island of Malta, Paul also healed the father of Publius, the chief official on Malta, who had been sick in bed with fever and dysentery. And after that the rest of the sick came and were also cured by Paul.

Last week's Testimony from John, Tychicus, Timothy and the Overseers and Elders of Ephesus

Described Paul as: Intellectually brilliant, deeply passionate, emotionally expressive, courageous under suffering, forceful in debate, tender pastorally, utterly committed to Christ, he could be severe when confronting error, yet warm and affectionate.

Previously, Priscilla and Aquila of Corinth

Who were instructed by Paul in Corinth. They Explained to apollo the way of God more: the way or hodos of Jesus is not just a theology, not just ethics, it's all of those but more it's a way of life a life style. A way of life modelled by Jesus more than anyone else; and *offering* more than anything else in this world.

Before that, Barnabas of Antioch

Who said Paul was the ideal minister for Antioch because such a minister must be Brave, must have a double background, a Jew brought up in the Jewish tradition but one who could meet and match the Gentiles on equal terms, skilful at arguing, a teacher, a preacher, with exceptional gifts.

Earlier, Philip of Samaria

Who presents the very opposite of the charges levelled against Paul. Philip offers A Picture of reunification. Allowing healing of century old bitter division between Jews and a breakaway Jewish community of Samaritans Christians to help them receive the the Holy Spirit and so demonstrate that they are equally chosen by God as Jewish Christians and are brothers and sisters in Christ - thereby fulfilling the Hebrew prophecy in Hosea 1:10 "to become children of the living God".

The first testimony, Peter of Jerusalem

Who testified before the same Jewish court in Jerusalem that condemned Jesus, that it was by the name of Jesus that he was able to heal a man who had been lame from birth. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved"

Conclusion

So having heard all of this testimony over the last 6 weeks of the acts of the apostles, what can I say? By way of conclusion and support of the case that Jesus is indeed the Risen LORD as the defendant Paul so adamantly contends.

We'll surely, this combined to testimony that we have heard cannot simply and easily be dismissed as fanciful tales and stories. They are too finely woven into historic events and places. The ring of truth they carry is as powerful as their consequences and meanings.

Let me conclude, therefore, by referring the Court back to where this 6 week presentation of the evidence of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ began.

If I might refer you to Chapter 1:8 of the bundle of evidence of the Acts of the Apostles:

Where the witness, Luke, records the words of Jesus Christ, the author of the Christian Account of Eternal Life, the alpha of the witness statements you

have heard. Jesus addresses those who follow him, those who are now known as Christians, with these words:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Having now heard evidence from Luke, you must now judge for yourself. You hold the full weight testimonies of the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection in your hands, in your heart and mind. What will you do with that weight?

Will you condemn it to irrelevance or a private and personal matter or a joke? You are the judge. And your judgment will determine the outcome - and its consequences. Whether the case for the Risen LORD should be dismissed and thrown out. Or whether it should be upheld.

Will you uphold the case for the risen LORD? In doing so, you uphold the case for hope; the case for salvation from sin and death; the case for pax aeternum: for eternal love and joy and peace.