

Easter 6, 2011  
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Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:13-22  
John 14:15-21

### **A Good Defence**

Everybody likes a good courtroom drama. Or at least it seems so. From the long running TV series Perry Mason to the best-selling novels of John Grisham, Americans have been obsessed with legal battles for decades. But so have Britons, if Rumpole of the Bailey and Kavanagh QC are any indication. There is something compelling and suspenseful about following these well-paid, articulate and highly-motivated legal professionals debate each other to the best of their abilities while the fate of the accused hangs in the balance. Sometimes we know the person charged is guilty, sometimes innocent, and sometimes we don't know. But one thing is sure: the accused needs a strong defence and a good lawyer. It all makes for powerful drama.

The Bible has this sort of drama, too. Back in the Old Testament there is the renowned story of King Solomon's judgment, that showed his God-given wisdom (1 Kings 3:16-28): two women are fighting over a baby, claiming they are both its mother. He resolved the dispute by threatening to have the baby cut in half. One of the woman begged for the child to be given to other, so long as it would not be harmed, thus proving she was the real mother, or at least deserved to be. High drama.

The man most likely to find himself in legal trouble in the New Testament was St Paul. Virtually every chapter since he appears (7:58), he is in some sort of trouble or other with the public authorities. He's brought before magistrates in Philippi for inciting civil disturbances and defying local customs. He was dragged to a tribunal in Corinth for allegedly promoting illegal worship. And in Jerusalem, he was accused of bringing Gentiles into the Temple, and so is interrogated by the tribune, accused by the Jewish Council, interviewed by the governor, and then, on appeal, is sent to Rome. Paul's adventures before the

authorities have all the plot twists of a modern courtroom intrigue.

The most famous, or rather infamous, example of a trial in the Bible is of course the trial of Jesus in the Gospels. In truth, of course, as in Paul's many cases, Jesus' trial was no real trial. It was a series of malicious plots and corrupt or cowardly judgments made by leaders who needed a scapegoat to blame and get rid of to calm the crowds. If a trial has any scrap of legality, any shred of justice, then Jesus trial had none of it, and was no trial, but almost a calculated lynching.

Looming above all of this, the stories of trials, even false ones, and tribulations in the Bible and in the rest of human history is the judgment of God. Whatever happens on earth, those who believe in a good and righteous God, look to the ultimate wisdom and holy judgment of God. Whatever happens to us, we have hope and confidence that God has it all ultimately in his hands.

One can only think that all those who have suffered injustices and have seen justice so long delayed – think of those who have been waiting 16 long years for Ratko Mladic to be arrested and brought to trial – those people can only cope if they feel that ultimately all will be made right. That is one of the great supports of having faith. 'All will be well,' as Dame Julian of Norwich said, even if one is in darkness for a time.

In this respect it is particularly notable that the language of the Bible speaks in terms of a law court so often. In a sense, the Bible recognizes that for us humans, the ways of God are often on trial. Look at the Book of Job in particular. But also the Bible shares what it is like to be a believer who knows that God is on trial and also that our beliefs are also on trial.

When we suffer or those whom we know and love suffer, we understandably wonder where our good God is in it all. Others

may wonder why we persist in believing. We may see signs of God's work and God's wisdom, but these are difficult to convey to those struggling with faith.

St Peter wrote to Christians who had heard of persecution and were preparing to endure it themselves. They were frightened, and losing resolve. Peter tries to bolster them that their choice for Christ and for the good was still the right one.

3:<sup>13</sup>Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?  
<sup>14</sup>But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,  
<sup>15</sup>but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence [the language of the courtroom!] to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you;  
<sup>16</sup>yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.' You may not win the day, but you will be on the winning side of eternity.

Jesus, before he goes to his death, comforts his disciples. He knows he is not only going to die, but believes he will be raised, and then leave his disciples a second time, to return to the Father in heaven. He reassures them and us that he, through the Spirit of God, will always be with us. The Spirit of God abides with us to encourage, empower and enlighten us, but also, where needed, to challenge us, to live closer to God.

Jesus says: 14:<sup>15</sup>If you love me, you will keep my commandments. [The Biblical understanding of love is that is never just an emotion or feeling, but real, committed love always involves some degree of obedience.] <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. [An Advocate, to know you, the good and the bad, an Advocate to counsel and comfort you, an Advocate to defend you and protect you.] <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot

receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.' We need God as our Advocate to face the trials of this world and to prove our worth.

Paul was on trial many a time, and depended on the Spirit to make a good defence. The account Luke gives of his speech before the Areopagus in Athens – probably one of the most sophisticated and critical audiences in the ancient world – is a textbook case of rhetoric. There was a mixed crowd of Stoics – philosophers who believed life should be lived in acceptance of what nature throws at us, free from emotion and passion –, and Epicureans – whose highest principle was pleasure managed so that it did not lead to pain. Athens was a place so full of religion they even had a temple to an unknown god, just to cover all their options. It is a society not unlike ours. Paul steps into this and speaks the language of his listeners, connects with their thoughts, but then tries to move them beyond. Just as Christ did. Christ begins with where we are, but brings us closer to God.

Paul perfectly follows Peter's advice: <sup>15</sup>'Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup>yet do it with gentleness and reverence.' But even when we do not feel as capable as Paul, we have all we need through the Spirit. Jesus himself had said, at the end-times, <sup>12</sup>'They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. <sup>13</sup>This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup>So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; <sup>15</sup>for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.'

If we know and trust that God in the Spirit is our Advocate, we can face any trial, legal, moral, spiritual or otherwise. Amen.