

**Journey's end**  
**Bible reading: Acts 28.11-31**



*And so we came to Rome. The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. Acts 28.14-15*

All roads lead to Rome. The *Peutinger Tafel* (above) is a medieval world map based on the ancient Roman itineraries — a sort of ancient Roman AA map that shows the major roads with service stations and overnight stops. You can see the Three Taverns (*Tres tabernas*) down on the right (by the big letter A). From there, the *Via Appia* leads you straight into the eternal city.

So — journey's end? In a way, yes — certainly it's the end of Luke's story. Paul has been making his way to Rome since 19.21, with that inner sense of being "bound" that comes from God. It's as if we and the narrator know he'll get there in the end, against all the odds — and they were some odds! But God had made a promise, and that was enough for Paul (23.11; 27.23-24).

And in a deeper sense, this is the end to which the whole book has been pointing. "You shall be my witnesses," Jesus said, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1.8). Rome might think of itself as the centre of the world, but in the Jewish imagination it was "the end of the earth" — or at least one of them. (Ethiopia was another.) Paul's arrival in Rome fulfils one of Isaiah's prophecies that seemed specially written for him: "I will give you as a light to the

*nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth”* (Isaiah 49.6 — cf. Acts 26.17-18).

And yet — there’s a definite feel of homecoming about this final stage of the journey. Paul has never been here before — yet there are “brothers and sisters” coming out to greet him and escort him into the city like a returning hero. After all the excitement of the shipwreck, there’s a homely, local feel about taking courage at the Three Taverns (as my Dad used to point out — Courage being a well-known Norfolk brewer.)

And there’s something strangely familiar about the final scene of the book. Paul has appealed to Caesar, and after the big build-up we expect a dramatic courtroom confrontation with the centre of imperial power. Instead, we find ourselves eavesdropping once again on an argument within the local Jewish community (v.17). Paul never forgot that his mission was to preach “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1.16) — the dual-focus vision expressed in Simeon’s words, when he takes the infant Jesus in his arms: “*a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel*” (Luke 2.32). It’s both-and, not either-or.

The argument is impassioned, but remarkably polite. “Tell us about this sect,” the local leaders say to Paul (vv.21-22). We want to know what all the fuss is about. And in many ways, I believe that’s the question to which Acts is the answer. Tell us about this Way that you’ve chosen, this Jesus who you say is alive, the message that God has given you. Tell us what brings you here, what knocked you off your high horse on the road to Damascus and jolted you into this extraordinary adventure. Tell us your story.

So in many ways the ending of Acts is inconclusive. We don’t find out what happened to Paul in the end — whether he got to make his case in the appeal court, whether he was released, whether he ever fulfilled his dream to preach the gospel in Spain (Romans 15.24 — though if you visit Tarragona, you’ll find several local churches there that claim Paul as their founder). Tradition tells us that Paul was martyred in Rome with Peter in Nero’s persecution of the Christians after the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64 (that’s why the church celebrates their joint feast-day on June 29<sup>th</sup> —which was yesterday). But was that on this visit — or later? We just don’t know.

And actually — I find this downbeat ending strangely comforting. The story that began so dramatically on a mountain-top, with the heavens

opening and angels appearing, ends rather inconsequentially in a back-street lodging in Rome. The rushing mighty wind of Pentecost, blowing the apostles out onto the streets and scattering the believers to the four corners of the earth, ends in an atmosphere of doubt and debate, with the patient, long-term work of winning hearts and minds, talking, discussing, bearing witness, sometimes convincing — and sometimes not. I find something reassuringly realistic about this ending — because that’s how the kingdom of God actually grows. The beginning of Acts belongs to the world of the Bible — the ending belongs squarely to our world. And you know what? That’s where God is!

*He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness — without hindrance. Acts 28.30-31*

The word is on the street — and it’s unstoppable. The journey isn’t ending — it’s only just beginning.

### **And then? What happens next?**

I came across this in this week’s Church Times, and thought immediately of our TFTD journey:

*“And then ...?”* St Andrew’s, Shifnal, has set up a community partnership. An MHA scheme trained the volunteers, *and then* Shifnal Town Council gave some money, *and then* the Co-op got involved, *and then* the White Hart offered food storage ... Lists like this can be tedious, but not if you use the repeated phrase “and then”. “And then” indicates momentum. It speaks of people wanting to make the most of each other’s efforts. “And then” is a signifier of a virtuous cycle that carries the thrill of inspiration, and, if it is not already recognised as a mission outcome, it ought to be. [Ann Morisy, writing in the *Church Times* Post-Pandemic issue, 26/6/20.]

Acts is very much an “*And then*” story, where one thing leads to another in a chain of apparent coincidences — chance meetings on the road, stray conversations, that push the kingdom of God forward. It’s an open-ended story that invites us to write the next chapter ourselves: because of course the next chapter, “Acts 29”, is *our* story, the bit we’ve been entrusted with. So for the rest of this week, our team of writers will reflect on this epic TFTD journey of reading Acts, what we’ve learned together and where God is leading us. That’ll take us to Friday this week.

**What’s next for TFTD?** It’s hard to predict how our lives will change as things start to look more “normal” — at least for some of us. So we’ve decided to keep TFTD going through July, but with a change of focus. So

from Monday next week TFTD will focus on the book of **Ruth**, following the Methodist Church resources for Bible Month. It's a shorter book, so we aim to offer three Bible readings on the story per week, with space for extra poems and personal reflections. Space too for your reflections on the whole TFTD experience — what you've learned, what you've enjoyed, how you'd like to take it forward. Just get in touch!

God bless, Loveday.