

Text of Rev. Abigail Sines' address



The lights go down, a hush falls across the room, and everyone settles into their seats, popcorn and sweets at the ready. Ominous music rises and we are treated to drama on the high seas: a centurion highly motivated to get his captive to Rome; a rising sense of dread as Paul warns of danger in continuing the voyage; the misplaced confidence of the ship captain and crew to safely navigate, even though entering an unfavourable season, when weather conditions increase the risk. We have all the makings of an action blockbuster. But Luke, our master story-teller, is bringing us along not merely in the narrative of Paul's physical journey to Rome, but a spiritual journey as well, full of symbolism along the way. Paul's destination is Rome, where he will bear witness to his faith before the highest authorities. The arc of the story towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles is hurtling towards this momentous destiny for St Paul.

In the midst of this dramatic journey and shipwreck, Paul is the picture of composure. We can use our imaginations to recreate those heated moments, but for all we know of Paul in the words here recorded, he had nothing but quiet confidence in the triumphant force of God's will, even against hurricane winds. The Paul presented here has internalised an attitude of utter trust in God's power. No hint of the astonishment that the disciples who had been in in the boat with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee in a storm and who had expressed wonder that even the wind and waves obeyed him.

Against Paul's quiet confidence is the increasingly desperate flurry of activity by the crew. The captain has taken a calculated risk in making the journey and the men are now using every bit of their experience as seafarers to make it through the storm. It's clear that things have reached a crisis point. And what does Luke take the time to point out to us? In chapter 27, vs. 33 'just before daybreak'. Luke is telling us a story of rescue, a story of being saved from the sea. We have travelled through the darkness and chaos of the storm, and it's just before daybreak, the light is nearly on the horizon. What does Paul say to this struggling, weather-beaten crew? 'Come on lads, you're exhausted, you're spent! Eat up now, you need something to get you through the last mile.' Luke tell us that Paul 'took bread; and

giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves.’ This beautiful, profoundly eucharistic sharing takes place in the darkness just before dawn. Then the crew free themselves of the last of the baggage and cargo, dumping everything over the side, and are ready to meet the rising sun. Ready to meet the new day, ready to meet their rescue.

It was not an easy rescue, mind you. The rescue came by way of a shipwreck. But on the pieces of the broken ship, all 276 souls were carried safely to land.

But what dangers await on this unknown island from animal predators or unfriendly inhabitants? Morning has broken in our story, and the dawn shines on a remarkable interaction between the men from the ship and native inhabitants of the island. We don’t have too many details about these people, but we know a few things. Luke tells us they are not Greek speakers, they are culturally and linguistically different from those who have just washed up on shore. Second, they show unusual kindness. I can imagine a natural reaction might have been fear, refusing to help or perhaps even taking violent action against the survivors, already exhausted from their battle with the sea. Yet they act with kindness—Philanthropia—a benevolence, humanity—that was against the norm, an uncommon response of benevolence.

Paul and his comrades are first recipients of the islanders hospitality, and later that of Publius, a local official. Paul engages in a ministry of praying for healing that touches the lives of all the islanders and out of disaster a relationship of friendship and respect is formed over the three months, until Paul and his comrades are able to continue the journey to Rome. The islanders who showed unusual kindness became part of Paul’s story and part of God’s story of the Good News reaching to all people. We have the witness of the church in Malta today, who have prepared this year’s service, as the legacy of that interaction so many years ago, when the islanders might have reacted with violence or rejection, but in fact acted with unusual kindness and genuine hospitality.

This amazing adventure story, provides plenty of food for thought as we reflect on what it means in our own lives. I offer two suggestions:

First, Look for God’s hand in the midst of the storm. As individuals, and as communities, we often face things that overwhelm, disorient and confuse us. Tragic loss, economic problems, relationship breakdown, hurt and pain. It’s easy to lose hope. Sometimes we may have a Paul alongside us, the cool head and steady person of faith to help us through. Or perhaps sometimes, our faith is stirred, and we become the person able to exercise quiet, confident trust in God and to help others to do the same.

Second, be people able both to graciously receive and to freely extend unusual kindness. How different would the world be if more people were living their lives in that frame of mind? Less defensive, less reactionary. More gracious, more open. We may find that unusual kindness comes to us from unexpected quarters, even from people very different from ourselves, people whom we thought had nothing to give and at just the right moment. As disciples of Jesus, we are first of all recipients of God’s self-giving ‘unusual kindness’, it should be part of our maturing walk of discipleship that the way of kindness, enlivened by the wisdom and discernment of God’s Spirit, increasingly fills our lives and interactions. Living from a sense of God’s abundance, rather than scarcity, our lives of unusual kindness can become extensions of our Heavenly Father’s compassion and care for all that he has created. By God’s grace may we be people who exercise unusual kindness in his name. Amen.