

Acts 28. 1-16 – Sermon for Trinity 4 Morning Worship

In April 2003 it was discovered that pre-written draft obituaries of several world figures of that era were available on a development area of the CNN website. The pages included tributes to Fidel Castro, Dick Cheney, Nelson Mandela, Bob Hope, Gerald Ford, Pope John Paul II, and Ronald Reagan. Some of these obituaries were very much in draft form and several contained fragments copied from others. So the site pointed to the Pope's 'love of racing', and in a copy-and-paste from a page on Ronald Reagan, described Fidel Castro as a 'lifeguard, athlete and movie star'. It also became apparent that the obituary to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother had been used as a template. Dick Cheney for example was described as the 'UK's favourite grandmother'.

It must be a strange thing, to read your own draft obituary. Strange to think that a news organisation is preparing to report on your death when you're still alive. Admittedly as I now segue seamlessly into talking about the Apostle Paul in Acts 28, that's not really what's going on for him. No-one is preparing his obituary. But maybe they should have been. Surely by rights or by the law of averages or something this guy should be dead by now. He's just been through his fourth shipwreck, to say nothing of all the other dangers he's faced in his life. And yet he's not dead. He's alive. Against all the odds, and only because of the power and protection of a sovereign good God, Paul is still alive. He should be dead by now, but he's still going.

Where have we got to? Well, in the lectionary readings for Sunday Matins, we've now almost finished the whole book of Acts. Recently we've been following Paul on a long and complicated transition from Jerusalem to Rome, which is where the risen Jesus has promised to take him so that he might testify about him there. Plenty has seemed to go wrong on this journey. Paul has endured several years of delay in prison under false accusations, defending himself in occasional trials and hearings, and in chapter 27 when he was finally put on a ship for Rome it was caught in a storm and shipwrecked on an unknown island.

It has all been pretty pathetic – not impressive at all. This is the great apostle to the Gentiles, miraculously converted by a direct encounter with the risen

Jesus. And yet he's been stuck in prison, caught in a two-week long storm and now he's lying face-down on a wet beach, cold, soaked, sand in his clothes, salt water in his mouth, trying to catch his breath and probably not even able to balance well enough to stand up on solid ground after two weeks of being thrown about on the Mediterranean Sea.

And yet, we have had the chance to watch from our comfortable, dry seats as the God who is sovereign over all creation has ordained all of this to happen and through it all has been working to fulfil his promise to take Paul to Rome. And as the passengers and crew of the ship wash up on land we get to see God at work one more time before our author, Luke, takes us there to Rome.

But instead they were driven to Malta.

Even more remarkable is that Malta is not too far off the beaten track when you're trying to get from the wrong side of Crete to Rome. It doesn't seem an overstatement to say that God has kept them on course in the storm. Not the conventional route, but not far off it at all. Not only has God ensured the survival of every soul but in his grace he's kept them more or less on course for Rome. By rights, by the law of averages and in their expectations, they should have died in that storm, but God has rescued them all, just as he promised, and brought them to safety at a place that is not far at all from the route they had planned. That's the first pointer towards our big idea. God overcame that scenario of death with deliverance and life.

But then there's this business of the snake.

Some of the islanders – who I learned this week are called Maltese, not Maltesers as I had hoped – some of the Maltese spot the wreck, or spot the 276 people washing up on the shore and they come down to offer help, first by building a fire so that everyone can get warmed up. Paul gets involved gathering fuel and picks up a bundle of sticks with a snake lying inside. Luke describes it as a viper, meaning it's a venomous biter, not a squeezer. Putting the wood on the fire drives the snake out. Luke doesn't explicitly say that it bit Paul; he says that it fastened itself on his hand, and then that the islanders saw it hanging from his hand and expected him to swell up and die, so I think it's pretty strongly implied. And look at what they say in v4:

"This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live."

It's interesting to note how every culture has a sense of justice. In fact I think every person has a sense of justice, absolute right and absolute wrong, and the desire that right be rewarded and wrong be punished. How many great films and TV shows centre on false accusation against a character who fights to clear his name, and how many feature a long plot line eventually leading to the bad guy getting what's coming to him? We want justice – the desire for it burns inside us. C.S. Lewis wrote, "[When I was an atheist] my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?" That's a bit of an aside that some of you will want to chew on more than others and I don't want to stray too far from the narrative.

The islanders assume along with the soldiers on the ship that Paul is a criminal, even though we know he was found to be innocent by several of the rulers who heard his case. Agrippa and Festus agreed Paul could have been released except for his appeal to be tried before Caesar in Rome. So Paul, who is innocent of the charges against him, was delivered from the storm by Jesus and likewise then from this venomous snake. They assume the goddess Justice is in control here, but in fact control rests with the sovereign God, who is just and who therefore saves Paul, overcoming death with life.

That's pretty good news for the Maltese. Remember Paul and the crew were supposed to winter in Crete. Malta was never part of the plan. And yet what a blessing for the Maltese that out of the trial and hardship of storm, shipwreck and snake-bite comes healing and restoration, death overcome by life, to keep to the theme. And although Luke doesn't mention it, I think we've got to assume that Paul spent these three months on Malta preaching the gospel. That's the pattern of Acts – where there's a miracle there's a message about Jesus. In which case there's even more for the Maltese to be thankful for – the unplanned, unscheduled arrival of the gospel on Malta, life from death again.

The islanders on Malta recognise that that shipwreck brought a great deal of blessing to them. They respond with gratitude, kindness and generosity,

supplying everything they needed to set sail again for Rome. Verse 11 tells us there was another ship wintering in the island that could take them onward. And in times when you had to bring your own supplies for the journey, including your own food, the islanders generously provided for them. Again we see God at work here. It's no small thing to make packed lunches for 276 people, never mind breakfasts, dinners and everything else. But because of God's power at work in Paul they are moved to respond.

And so we came to Rome.

There's a lot in that word 'so', isn't there? And so, in this way, by these things, we came to Rome. How? Beating, arrest, imprisonment, trial, assassination attempt, transfer, trial, two years more in prison, another assassination plot, another trial, a hearing, a sea-journey, a storm, a shipwreck, a snake-bite, three months on Malta and an uneventful final leg of the journey. And so we came to Rome.

Even though those years of transition between Jerusalem and Rome have been filled with all sorts of difficulties, crises, pain and reasons to doubt and even disbelieve, the sovereignty of God has stretched out over all of it like a great all-encompassing canopy, or lain underneath it all like a solid foundation. Again and again God has demonstrated in the circumstances that he has ordained that he is in control, he is working out his purposes, he is keeping his promises, he is acting in his timing. And more than that. God has demonstrated that he is good, he is merciful, he is gracious, and above all that his business is overcoming death with life. It's the heart of the gospel and it's painted out for us in these chapters with bright, vivid colour.