**God in the Storm: Acts 27**

All Saints’ 10am 22.3.20

**Good Morning!**

**Happy Mothering Sunday!**

Not always an easy celebration. Amid genuine appreciation of wonderful mothers, past and present, there are many families that are broken, where parents are absent, and children and mothers suffering. There are bereavements and disappointments. We need to be sensitive and caring. May God bless every family today.

**But what probably dominates our thinking today is the Corona virus, Covid -19.**

Our sermon series in the book of Acts comes to a close next week, but perhaps it’s no coincidence that in the penultimate chapter there’s an account of a hurricane at sea. What has God to say to us today through this detailed account of raging storm and shipwreck?

The spiritual and cultural setting:

 A quick recap on the outline of Acts which Chrystal brought to us a few weeks ago:

* **Acts is Luke’s second volume** and is about *All that Jesus continued to do to build his kingdom:*

*through his chosen people*

*by his Holy Spirit*

*to the very ends of the earth*

* **Jewish culture** saw the sea as representing the dark forces of chaos opposed to God’s purposes of salvation for His world.
* **Luke’s narrative in Acts** mirrors the narrative of his Gospel: there is a cosmic battle between the dark forces of evil and the ultimate victory of God in the resurrection of Jesus. The rescue from the shipwreck uses the same terminology of **salvation** and echoes the earlier saving act of God through Noah’s Ark, later through the Red Sea, as well as the imagery of Baptism. God is the God who saves from the waves of death.
* **This description of the storm and shipwreck is the longest and most detailed of any voyage in ancient literature. It must be important!**

**If you have a bible,** please do turn to Acts (the 5th book of the NT after the gospels) chapter 27. You may also have a map showing the route of this particular sea journey.

**Background to the story**

**Why is Paul on a ship heading for Italy? There are two dimensions to the reason why.**

* The human dimension: Our story begins in Caesarea, where Paul has been taken after a Jewish plot to assassinate him was discovered in Jerusalem. Paul is before the Roman governor Felix. In order to avoid being lynched by a Jewish mob if he’d been sent back to a court in Jerusalem Paul, as a Roman Citizen, had appealed to Caesar. Having appealed to Caesar he had to be taken to Rome, even though the Roman authority in Caesarea didn’t think he was guilty of any crime. (See Acts 24-26)
* The divine dimension**:**

God had a purpose for Paul to preach the gospel in Rome and was going to use Paul’s appeal to get him there. (Remember that Jesus had said that his people were to be witnesses to Him, beginning in Jerusalem and through the known world to the ‘ends of the earth’). While still in Jerusalem guarded by Roman soldiers The Lord appeared to Paul and said, ‘*Be encouraged Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.’ Acts 23.11*

**Who goes with him?**

* 2 Christian companions, Luke and Aristarchus (who had been with Paul earlier in Ephesus, whom Paul calls his co-worker)
* The Roman centurion Julius, some other prisoners and Roman soldiers
* Sailors and merchants, on the second ship carrying grain from Egypt to feed the large population of Rome

**When do they travel?**

* Dangerously late in the year. In those days, sea voyages ceased between November and March, and it was considered risky from mid-September. The weather slows them down on the first part of the journey, as we see in v.9 where it mentions that ‘The Fast’ (the Day of Atonement) had already happened. This was on October 5th that year, AD 59.

**What happens?**

* At Myra they join a second ship from Egypt bound for Italy. The weather is awful, and they just make it to an inadequate harbour in Crete called Fair Havens.
* Paul advises against trying to go further, warning of the likely loss of cargo, ship and even life. *Paul was an experienced sea-traveller, having made 11 journeys already, clocking up 3,500 miles and had known shipwreck, including being adrift in the sea for 36 hours. Perhaps he also had a sense in his spirit that God was warning the crew through him.* But the captain and ship’s owner decide to take a risk and move on to try to find a better port for overwintering.
* Next comes **The Storm** described as a Hurricane or Typhoon (v.14) They are driven out to sea helpless against the violence of the wind which drove them along, battering the ship. Despite the various efforts to save the ship - hauling up the lifeboat, ‘frapping’ the ship to keep it from breaking up, lowering the sea anchor to slow it down and avoid sandbanks, jettisoning some of the cargo (precious grain bound for Rome), then much tackle and equipment – all seems to have been in vain and the storm continued to rage for many days, blotting out light from sun and stars. It must have been Terrifying.

**How does Paul react to all this?** NB: *Paul is one of 3 Christians among 273 non-Christians, but clearly emerges with gifts of leadership and authority.*

* ‘Take Courage’ (v.22,25) – based not on ‘whistling in the dark’/stiff upper lip/Blitz spirit, but on the promise of an angel to Paul: ‘Don’t be afraid Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What’s more, God in His goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.’ (v.24) There’s a hint here that Paul had been praying for the whole group. And so he says again, ‘Take courage! For I believe in God. It will be just as He said.’
* Keep united (v.27-32): Paul intervened to stop the sailors abandoning ship. Unity is vital, and contingent upon God keeping his promise to preserve all of them.
* Take food (v.33-38) Practical common sense in view of the weakness induced by seasickness, fear and anxiety. In the taking of food Paul demonstrates his dependence on the Lord, by following Jesus’ example in feeding the 5000: breaking of bread and giving thanks to God. Paul’s example of eating enables others to follow.

**What can we learn from this detailed account? How can *we* respond to storms?**

**1. Pray.**

Although there’s only a hint that Paul prayed, we know from other accounts in Acts and from everything he wrote to Christians that prayer was second nature to him. So let’s pray. Pray for leaders, for the NHS and front-line workers, for our nation and for the world. Pray for God to halt the spread of the virus. Pray about every other storm in life. Keep our focus on God, not on the ‘storms’. He’s in control. And in praying – Listen! Read the bible, wait in silence, stillness and simplicity. God is a God who speaks and He’s a Father who loves to communicate with us.

* Some storms are predictable. It’s wise to take advice, to weigh up risks. The ship’s captain and owner preferred to take the risk of leaving Fair Havens in search of a better harbour, but Paul warned against this. He knew about likely storms and shipwreck. It seems when difficult choices need to be made, we’d be wise to listen to both experts *and* to the Holy Spirit’s inner convictions. It’s important to ask God about our decisions.
* Some storms in life come suddenly and terrifyingly**.** What compounds the problem is our attitude. Looking only at circumstances can lead to fear and panic and even despair (v 20) But there is an alternative response that this story and the bible generally give us. Look **up** to the God who loves us, not **down** to circumstances (storm) and **in** to fear and panic. He has promised, as we’ve been learning ‘I am with you to very end of the age,’ and ‘never to leave us or forsake us.’

**2. Be wise and practical.**

*Cf. ‘I believe in God and I believe in soap’!* Follow guidelines and listen.

Know our own capacity to take in difficult news and don’t overdo listening to it. Too much and we can begin to be fearful and panic.

**3. Serve where you can.**

The text suggests that the Christians helped the crew, for instance in hauling up the life-boat (v.16) And Paul took a lead, encouraged the others, stopped disunity, invited people to eat, set an example of trusting God.

**4. Encourage one another by phone or on line if not in person socially.**

There were 3 Christians on the ship. Paul commends Luke and Aristarchus in letters as encouragers and fellow-workers. Join a home group if you don’t yet belong. Discover ways to have joint virtual meetings (I’ve just been helped to work out one such group facility.)

**5. Remember that God is in control!**

Before this shipwreck Paul had already experienced extraordinary suffering and danger. In writing to the Christians in Corinth he listed opposition, persecution, beatings, floggings, stoning, imprisonments, shipwrecks and the threat of death multiple times. But he could write that *nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He knew what it was to depend on God*. We can too.

Our current situation with Covid-19 demonstrates that we are not in control. We never have been, but with recent events, we’re discovering our need for God. Who is He?

* He’s the creator and sustainer of the universe. *There is no other*.
* He’s revealed Himself in Jesus (‘whoever has seen me has seen the Father’) who tells us that God cares for us, that we’re more valuable than many sparrows, that even the hairs on our head are all numbered, and that it’s the Father’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom.
* He’s the Father who did not spare even His own Son in order to bring us back to Himself through the Cross and Resurrection, thereby assuring us of eternal life with Him – eternal life that is of a different order to anything we’re experiencing in this life: no illness, no hospitals, no death, no grief. Our hope is in the Lord; it’s sure and certain.
* He’s the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the One alongside us through thick and thin, revealing the Father’s love that drives out fear.

**6. Share your confidence in God’s faithfulness and goodness with others.**

We have wonderful Good News to share about God’s love which transcends all storms and emergencies. The encouraging end to this story is something for next week, but the outcome of the shipwreck is that loads of people on Malta hear about Jesus, and experience God’s healing power.

Who knows how God will use this current storm? Let’s keep trusting and passing on God’s peace and love to those with whom we are in touch.

**Amen**