

## **“A POSTCARD FROM MALTA”**

### *Acts 28:1-10*

People who have crossed the Channel on the ferry – be it from Dover, Ramsgate, Harwich, Portsmouth or wherever – will often regale you with stories of what a rough crossing they’ve had. And if you get more than three together in one place it becomes very competitive (a bit like mothers’ birth stories and ministers’ stories of baptisms, weddings and funerals which went spectacularly wrong). Whoever you speak to will have crossed the Channel in higher winds than you have, will have witnessed more damage than you did, will have either thrown up more food than you did or been the only person who wasn’t sick out of the entire ship’s company. Had Paul been part of one of these competitive story groups, I think he might have won hands down.

We didn’t read that part of the story this morning, but if you take the trouble to look back at chapter 27, you’ll see that Paul and his companions left Caesarea for Rome at just the wrong time of year. Along with Paul were Luke (who’s telling the story) and Aristarchus the Macedonian, together with Julius, the Roman officer escorting Paul to his trial before Caesar, a number of other soldiers and over 250 other crew, passengers and prisoners. You can follow their route on one of the maps at the back of your Bible, and you’ll see that things started to go horribly wrong as they sailed past Crete. The hurricane force wind blew them across to Malta where the ship was eventually wrecked as they ran it aground. En route Paul, who seems to know everything about everything, actually has the gall to stand up and tell them that if they’d listened to him they wouldn’t be in this mess (27:21).

We pick up the story this morning as Paul and his companions, guards, fellow-travellers and the crew of the ship fetch up on the shore on an island they called Melita, and which is today known as Malta. If you’ve ever been there, you’ll know there is a whole industry that has been built up around the supposed site of Paul’s landfall. The boat is completely wrecked – both by the force of the storm and by the crew who have dismantled bits of it for various reasons – and it is now winter in the southern Adriatic, so no-one with any sense is setting sail. The people who were on the boat have no choice but to stay on Malta for the winter: according to 28:11, that’s three months. And it is from Malta that this morning’s postcard is sent to Priscilla and Aquila. [Postcard on screen.]

Fortunately, the natives are friendly. The version from which we read refers to them as “*islanders*”, but the Greek word is “*barbaroi*”. It gives us our English word “barbarian”, which we take to mean someone uncivilised and uncouth. The Greeks used the word for any foreigner who didn’t speak Greek – it was originally based on the noise they made when they spoke (“bar-bar-bar”). These were thoroughly Romanised people of Phoenician ancestry and they showed “*unusual friendliness*”, writes Luke, telling us that they made a fire to help warm them and, as we read on, showed them great hospitality – not least by Publius welcoming them into his home for three days (presumably only Paul and his group, not the entire shipload of them!).

What is interesting, though, is what Luke tells us about these three months on Malta. You may have noticed that in the account Luke gives us there is no mention of Paul preaching, teaching or otherwise proclaiming the Gospel in words. I’m sure he must have done at some point, but Luke chooses to focus on a couple of other incidents which might give us some cause for encouragement, especially if we don’t feel we’re cut out for witnessing by speaking to people. Let’s just have a brief look at them this morning.

### **1. PAUL AND THE SNAKE**

When they first wash up on the shore, the bedraggled travellers are helped by the islanders who build a fire to help them warm up and dry out. Paul is clearly helping to gather wood to go on the fire, when a snake – a “*viper*” according to Luke – attaches itself to his hand. Just a quick aside here: there are apparently no poisonous snakes on Malta today, but there must have been then because the islanders clearly expected Paul to be harmed by it (28:6). Their first response is to assume that this is some kind of

divine retribution. Here is Paul, guarded by Roman soldiers, so he must have done something wrong, and he has survived the storm, so the gods are now trying to exact justice by killing him with a snake. But nothing happens – clearly Paul’s God is at work – so they then assume Paul is divine himself. It’s not the first time that has happened – Barnabas and Paul were hailed as gods in Lystra after a healing (14:11).

Paul is protected by God as he still has work for him to do. God’s purpose is that Paul will go to Rome and speak before Caesar at the very heart of the Roman Empire (23:11). But others are able to see that Paul’s God is active, working in his life to protect him and fulfil his will. Paul has no need to speak because what God is doing in his life is so eloquent in itself.

## 2. PAUL AND THE SICKNESS

It’s not clear why Publius offers hospitality to Paul. He is the “*chief official*” of the island and has a Roman name, so is most likely the Governor of Malta. Maybe he offers hospitality to Julius, the centurion in charge of Paul and his group, an officer of the elite Imperial Regiment (27:1), and so has to take his prisoners as well. Maybe it is that Paul is known to be some kind of celebrity. Maybe he’s just generous.

Anyway, while Paul is staying with Publius, he discovers that Publius’ father is ill with “*fever and dysentery*”. Many people take this to be the well known “Malta Fever”. Apparently, this was common in Malta, Gibraltar and other Mediterranean islands. A micro-organism, which was finally traced in 1887 to the milk of Maltese goats, caused the problem, which you can now be vaccinated for. In Paul’s day, though, it caused a fever which lasted for an average of four months, but could persist for up to three years. When Paul found out, he prayed and laid hands on the sick man, who was immediately healed. No doubt as Publius’ was well known on the island, news of his father’s cure went round pretty quickly and soon everyone else who was sick on Malta came to see Paul and they were all healed (28:9).

What’s going on here, then? As we’ve noted already, Paul does no preaching or evangelising as such – certainly he doesn’t appear to get involved with the proclamation of the gospel as he usually does. He doesn’t face any persecution – he and his group receive good hospitality and they are “*honoured in many ways*” (28:10). Why does Luke include this in his account? Well, you could say that he is trying to record everything about the journeys, but there is still an awful lot that he leaves out, so he’s still being pretty selective in what he chooses to write about.

I would suggest that this little episode is here to remind us that Paul was witnessing – and witnessing very effectively, it seems – simply by allowing other people to see what God was doing in and through him. Clearly something supernatural was going on, both in Paul’s protection from the venomous snake and in his the healing of Publius’ father. It was something that **in itself** communicated the truth about God and his dealings with Paul. What is going on is obvious simply by the way he lives his life.

And that should say something to us that is both an encouragement and a challenge. We are not all great preachers, gifted communicators of the story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ using words. Some of us get very tongue-tied indeed when we talk to others about anything, let alone about our faith. Some of us get very anxious about the constant pressure that we can feel to witness to others about our faith – and we take “witness” to mean talking about it. But remember the words of St Francis: “*Preach the gospel at all times: if necessary, use words*”. That’s the encouragement – we don’t all have to be people with an amazing and confident “gift of the gab”. If you aren’t cut out to be a talker, don’t worry – you can still be a witness as you allow people to see what God is doing in your life.

And there’s the challenge: we need to live in such a way that other people can see that God is at work in us. I know I often quote it, but that doesn’t make it any the less relevant – remember Peter and John, up before the magistrates after being arrested for preaching outside the Temple. The magistrates “*realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, and they were astonished because they took note that they had*

*been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).* In fact, there are many places in the Bible where we read that the way we live our lives, the things that we allow others to see happening in our lives, are actually a great way to win other over to Christ. Jesus himself says that’s the reason we are to live according to his teaching. In The Sermon on the Mount he tells his followers that they are to be *“salt and light”* and they are to let that light shine out so that *“people may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).* Peter himself picks up the theme in his first letter when he writes, *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they may accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Peter 2:12).* It’s most unfortunate that the opposite so often happens: people won’t have anything to do with Jesus Christ because they have been put off by his followers and the immoral, unhelpful, unattractive lives that we lead.

But wouldn’t it be great if people could say of us all – as I have heard said of one or two of you – “I wish I could have something of what she’s got”; if our lives were of such quality that people could see that it really is worth following Jesus; if we were able to let God work in us – through changed lives, through his work in healing, leading, guiding us, through the obvious peace, joy and serenity with which we live our lives – that others really wanted to get involved? There’s a great picture in the book of *Zechariah* in the Old Testament, which I came across this week (as I’ve been given it to preach on elsewhere tonight), a picture of God’s people showing so clearly what God has done for them that others are desperate to get a bit of it themselves. In *Zechariah 8*, the prophet is talking about the great things that God has in store for his people, the ways in which he is going to shower his blessings on their lives, and he imagines that other people will be so eager to enjoy that too that they grab hold of people going to worship him. This is *Zechariah 8:23*: *“In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you’.”*

I reckon that’s what is happening here with Paul on Malta. He is allowing what God is doing in and through him to show through to the people of the island – and, although Luke doesn’t mention any conversions, they are clearly touched by it all. Do you think we could do that in Lichfield? Could we, as God’s people, as followers of Jesus Christ, live in such a way that people want a share in what we’ve got? Let’s pray that God will show his love to us in such a way that others notice. And let’s pray that we, as his people, allow that to shine through and affect the lives of others. Don’t worry too much about preaching the Gospel, about finding the right words to say. Just be eager to find the right way to live.

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After a fierce storm (see chapter 27), Paul and his companions fetch up on the shore of Malta. The boat is completely wrecked and it is now winter in so they have no choice but to stay on Malta for the winter: (28:11). Fortunately, the natives are friendly. But in the account Luke gives us there is no mention of Paul preaching, teaching or otherwise proclaiming the Gospel in words. Instead Luke chooses to focus on a couple of other incidents which might give us some cause for encouragement, especially if we don't feel we're cut out for witnessing by speaking to people.

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**Questions for discussion**

1. Why do we often assume that "witnessing" involves preaching – or, at least, speaking?
2. Can you think of anyone whose life has really demonstrated God's activity within them? How do you respond to that?
3. Would more supernatural activity in our lives mean a more powerful witness? Should we strive for that or not? If so, how could we encourage it?
4. What could we do as a church to be a more powerful witness through our actions?

5. What could ***you*** do to be a more effective witness? What are you going to do?