

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



Sanctuary Windows (Upper North Side)

St Paul's Shipwreck

Thursday in the Fourth Week of Lent



The Angel comes to rescue St Paul on the ship

Reading: Acts 27:

Soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. Since the ship was caught and could not be turned with its head to the wind, we gave way to it and were driven. By running under the lee of a small island called Cauda we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. After hoisting it up they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the sea-anchor and so were driven. We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. **For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship,** and he said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you." So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.'

Commentary

Paul had been arrested and tried before the Procurator of Judea, Festus, (c 59 or 60AD). However, with the right of a Roman citizen, Paul appeals to Caesar. He is put under the charge of a centurion named Julius, who treats Paul kindly, and they embark for Rome at a time when sailing would be dangerous. Paul, who tells us in one of his letters that he has been shipwrecked three times. (2 Cor 11:25-26) and is aware of the dangers of the sea, advises them against the journey. (Traditionally, no journeys on the open sea were attempted after November 11th and the preceding weeks were also regarded as dangerous). Nevertheless, they proceed, intending to spend winter in a harbour in Crete.

As they sail, a storm blows up. It is described in a vivid and dramatic way, with lots of detail about the emergency actions taken by the crew to steady the boat. One is only too aware in reading the passage of how frightening it must have been to be caught up in the middle of such a tempest on the open sea.

A fortnight adrift, the ship eventually reaches the shores of Malta, and the crew, fearful of running aground, prepare to abandon ship. The Centurion puts a stop to this. Paul then speaks to reassure them all and encourages them to eat - 'all 276 persons on the ship.' In the morning they beach the ship in a bay on the island of Malta and land safely, staying there for three months.

In Malta, the site of the wreck is called St Paul's island and the Maltese Christians make a great deal of the Feast of St Paul's Shipwreck on 10th

February with Masses and processions and marching bands. The Book of Acts tells us that Paul stayed with the Romans' chief man on the island, Publius, and healed his father. Tradition has it that Publius became a Christian and the first Bishop of Malta. Malta was certainly one of the first Roman provinces to convert to Christianity.

Meditation

Sometimes this passage has been used as a metaphor for the overwhelming difficulties we can experience in life as individuals and as a society: work, finance, uncertain futures, broken relationships, mental health issues, drugs and alcohol problems, homelessness. There is so much overwhelming misery and struggles that many people experience each day of their lives. Globally, over 70 million people are displaced or refugees, with thousands joining them each day, and about 1 in 9 people on earth do not have enough food to lead a healthy, active life.

Yet, remarkably, during all this suffering, the one thing which often sustains so many people is their faith. In the midst of suffering and crisis, Paul encouraged the people to eat, 'he took bread, and giving thanks to God, in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then they were all encouraged.' (Acts 27:35) Faith is the food for the journey, sustenance for the bad times as well as the good, the compass by which we navigate. In the multiple overwhelmings of our life, we often rely on those spiritual habits and practices that shape our days, our weeks and our year. For me, as for many others, it is the regular attendance at the

Eucharist that sustains and nourishes the soul in times of joy and sadness, in difficulty and in thanksgiving.

Prayer

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, Lord, in thy mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last.
Amen.

Prayer of St John Newman