1 July 2018: Choral Matins

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 6; Deuteronomy 15: 1-11; Acts 27: 33-44

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Have you ever been out at sea in a storm?

I remember going out on a boat trip from Greece, island hopping on a sunny day like today. All was well until the afternoon when we began to head for home. The wind got stronger and stronger. Dark clouds rolled in. Lightning flashed. Thunder roared and the waves reared up as if from nowhere to leave the boat violently tossing and turning. Thankfully we made it back to port.

Our reading from Acts today describes a real life Shipwreck. Paul is a prisoner, on his way to Rome, with about 250 other prisoners packed into a wooden ship, guarded by soldiers and crew. It can’t have been very comfortable. They’d had to find shelter in a small harbour in Crete, and, not wanting to spend the whole winter there, the crew set sail for a larger, better harbour at the other end of the island. In good weather, a simple journey. But this wasn’t going to be good weather.

The wind freshened, then changed direction until a sharp northeaster drove them away from land. Ships had no engines in those days, and there was nothing they could do but allow the boat to be driven headlong by the gale. Fearing that they would be driven onto rocks they took down the sail, and lowered the sea anchor. The ship still was driven on, pounded by great waves, with the decks soaked with seawater and pitching and rolling from side to side. It must have been terrifying, not least for the prisoners, with people sick and packed together in the stinking hold of the ship.

When the sailors started throwing valuable cargo and ship’s tackle overboard everyone could tell this was no ordinary storm. Their very lives were at stake. Paul tells us that they went several days and nights without seeing sun or stars, literally in the dark in other words as they were the only means of navigation. Even the Captain would have no idea where they were on all that wide ocean. Fourteen more nights passed in this state.
Fourteen, can you imagine? Four hours on a ferry in high seas is hard enough, but fourteen nights on a wooden boat with no toilets in high seas…! NO wonder Paul says, ‘All hope of our being saved was abandoned.’

They were in the pit of despair, just as John Wesley, old boy of this college would be in a similar voyage many years later. In Wesley’s case, he was hugely touched by the quiet faith of Moravian Christians on board who did not despair, but faithfully prayed each day. In Paul’s case, he was the one who led the people in prayer, giving them hope, encouraging them to have something to eat, convinced that they would somehow reach land.

Eventually, after what must have felt like an eternity at sea, they sighted land. An island, with a beach to land on. It must have felt like heaven itself. But one more nightmare was to come. As it approached this unknown land, the ship caught on a reef underneath the waves, and was stuck fast, some way from shore. The waves pounded the stricken vessel, and as it started to shatter, in what must have been a scene of utter horror, the soldiers prepared to run each prisoner through with the sword. It was their job to bring prisoners securely to Rome, to face trial, torture, even death in the arena. That was bad enough. But worse for the soldiers was to allow their prisoners to escape, to find their freedom. Better to murder each one here and now. Until the Centurion stepped in to prevent this slaughter, perhaps influenced by Paul. The ship broke up and all were given the chance to swim to shore, grabbing planks of wood or whatever they could to aid their escape.

No idea where they were, it was in fact Malta, where St Paul’s Bay lies to this day. All 276 on board survived, we are told, and the unknown natives showed them, ‘unusual kindness’.

It’s impossible to read this and not to think of the migrant crisis played out as we sit here, across that same Mediterranean Sea. Overcrowded dinghies; migrants from across Africa and the Middle East; not guarded by soldiers, but let loose on the high seas by ruthless traffickers in human cargo. Thousands of men, women and children have died at sea. Thousands more have reached Greece, Italy, Spain and even the island that saved St Paul, Malta. These are not Europe’s richest countries, yet they are at the southern border of our continent and face the greatest pressure from unplanned migration. Populist governments are coming to power, as richer nations, especially the UK, refuse to share the burden in any meaningful way. At the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, when a million Syrians arrived in Greece on boats of every size and shape, almost every
country in Europe offered to share their burden. But the UK refused to take a single person, choosing to wash our hands of the whole affair, thankful that we could hide behind the English Channel. There is a limited programme now, small in scale, but at least the diocese and others are part of that, and we have just been able to house our first Syrian refugee family in a church house here in Oxford.

There are no easy solutions of course. We know that. But somehow we need to pay heed to the call from Deuteronomy today, ringing out across the centuries.

‘Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted. There will never cease to be need on the earth. I command you. Open your hand to the poor and needy.’