

Sea Sunday
St. Paul's by the Sea, Milford
12 July 2015

Sea Sunday is an opportunity each year for us to reflect on the sea and ships and those who sail on them; those who 'go down to the sea in ships, doing their business on the mighty waters' (as the Psalm reads), to pray for their safety and to support the work of those who care for them. This church is named St Paul's by the Sea and although it's a little further from the sea than the old church, we are in a community that's been influenced by the sea – the marina and the very name of this place, Milford, reflecting the name Milford Haven, literally a haven for ships on the coast of Wales.

Many of us have strong connections with the sea. You may have served on a ship, you may have worked by the sea, you may have sailed a boat, been on a cruise, you may have a view of the sea from your home. That's certainly my own experience. I was brought up in and spent my childhood in a port. It was a fascinating place to be. Later on I had the opportunity of serving as a chaplain to the RNZNVR in Wellington and often sailed on the patrol ship *Wakakura*. I use a ferry whenever I get the chance, I tasked photos of ships, we're booked on a cruise later this year. And so on. There's something very romantic about the sea, something very engaging about ships and something very special about those who sail on ships and keep our harbours open.

It's amazing how often the Bible makes reference to the sea. And that's reflected in today's readings. Job's powerful words about the creation – 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?' – the land, the sea, the stars, the whole created order. Then the exquisite words of the psalm - we just had to use it today! The gospel story of the calming of the storm.

And of course the story of the Apostle Paul's maritime exploits. In Paul's account of his exploits in 2 Corinthians 11:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty,

often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble and I am not indignant?

Shipwrecked three times. Adrift at sea for a day and a night.

Today in our reading from Acts 27 we have a fuller account of his experience. Paul, by then a prisoner, was being transported to Rome along with others. The route they are to take is described in some detail but we don't need to consider the details. Suffice it to say that the ship has failed to find a good port to lay up for the winter so they attempt to get to the nearest good port. Paul advises them against it: "Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." But the centurion pays more attention to the pilot and to the ship's owner than to Paul. We read on and find that all is OK until a violent wind, a nor'easter, hits the ship. "We were being pounded by the storm so violently that the next day they began to throw all the cargo overboard. All hope of our being saved was abandoned."

Then Paul had that wonderful opportunity; one of those opportunities we all yearn for! He says, "Men, you should have listened to me! You shouldn't have set sail from Crete". He then offers encouragement. "I urge you now to keep up your voyage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only the ship." He explains. "Last night an angel appeared to me and said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul. You must stand before the Emperor. God has granted safety to all who are sailing with you'." Paul adds, "Keep up your courage, for I have faith in God that all will be well, but we will have to run aground on some island."

And then we take up the story in today's reading. 14 nights later and they're drifting. The sailors suspected they were nearing land. They take soundings – 20 fathoms, a little later 15 fathoms. They let down four anchors in case they're grounded. But then the sailors try to escape. They lower a boat from the ship on the pretext of putting out anchors. But Paul says to the centurion in charge and to the soldiers: Unless they stay on the ship you can't be saved. Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift.

Paul then gets everyone, the passengers and the crew, to have something to eat. "Today is the 14th day you've been in suspense and have not eaten. Have something to eat." He took some bread, broke it, and gave thanks. That sounds very much like Holy Communion: took it, broke it, gave thanks. There were 276 on board. After eating they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

The next morning they plan to run the ship aground, if they can. They cast off the anchors and leave them in the sea. They loosen the ropes that tied the steering-oars; they hoist the foresail to the wind; they make for the beach. But they strike a reef; they run the ship aground, but the bow is stuck and remains immovable, while the stern is being broken up by the force of the waves. In other words, the ship is torn to pieces.

In desperation the soldiers plan to kill the prisoners, but the centurion refuses. He wants to save Paul. He stops them from carrying out their plan. In the end the call goes out to abandon ship. Those who can swim are ordered to jump overboard. The others are to follow on planks and on pieces of the ship. And in the end all are brought safely to land.

And then the passage ends with some wonderful words. They learn that they have actually landed on the island of Malta. "The natives showed us unusual kindness. They kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it."

The story holds our interest. It's a racy account of high drama at sea. It paints a picture of Paul we mightn't otherwise have. Indeed we can learn a lot about him from it. Four things come to mind:

We see Paul as offering practical help. He feeds them; he gives good advice.

1. He builds a fire after the shipwreck. He caters for their physical and material needs and not just their spiritual needs. That comes later.
2. He encourages them. Notice how he holds the group together. He encourages them to try to survive.
3. But he doesn't neglect to offer spiritual help. He keeps on praying for them. He keeps on praying with them for their safety. We're all in this together.
4. But he could only do this because he had earned their trust earlier through good advice and personal support.

Practical help. Encouragement. Prayer. Earning their trust.

I recall that when I was commissioned as a chaplain in the Navy I was reminded by the Bishop concerned that Paul was one of the first naval chaplains. The work of a naval chaplain and the work of a Mission to Seafarers chaplain is much the same – to be a friend and advisor to all on board - and it's hardly changed in 2000 years. Take this story of a ship that went aground near Southampton on the south coast of England. It's told by the chaplain.

The ship *Hoegh Osaka* grounded near Southampton.

"I received a call at around 11pm on Saturday night from the Maritime and Coastguards Agency to tell me that a vessel had run aground in the Solent and that a maritime chaplaincy team was needed to urgently assist. We offered to take the men to the Southampton Seafarers Centre to make them more comfortable.

We arrived at the Centre at around 2am. The Centre Manager had called ahead to Centre staff, who came in straight away. When we arrived there was hot soup, coffee and sandwiches ready for them all and the manager's wife had brought blankets, jumpers and socks. I made sure that all the crew could use my mobile phone. By 4am the shipping agents and the lawyers had arrived and arranged to transfer the men to a local hotel. We were all there to make sure that there was continuity of care for the men - from rescue to hotel. We stayed with them every day to offer support and provided them with basics such as toothpaste, shaving kits, etc. and simple friendship. The emergency situation was handled with great care, professionalism and energy by everyone involved."

Just like Paul, the day to day visits to ships and running of the centres for seafarers by the Chaplaincy team had earned the trust of the seafarers. They could then offer Practical Support, Emotional encouragement and Prayer.

However, things do not always turn out well though and the Mission to Seafarers is there if crises at sea turn tragic.

Take the sinking of the ship *Cemfjord* off Scotland. It went down with the loss of all eight crew on board. The Mission to Seafarers Chaplain established contact with the local community in Wick and a service was held with the Scottish Episcopal Church for those affected. The Mission contacted their partner agency, The Apostleship of The Sea, in Poland (where seven of the eight crew lived), to help ensure pastoral care of the families.

In short, the Mission to Seafarers is there for seafarers in tragedy and crisis, because of their day to day work of visiting ships and running seafarers centres. They are all called in crises to offer practical, emotional and prayerful support to those affected.

Please support the Mission in its work helping seafarers in crisis and in the day to day through: being a volunteer, contributing to the Mission so that it can continue to give the practical support that is needed and most of all by offering your **prayers** for the work of the Mission.