

PAULS' SHIPWRECK – FAITH AT THE HEART OF SOLUTIONS.

CHESTER, January 2020

Through the eye-glass of St. Paul's shipwreck, you've asked me to speak about how faith is at the heart of solutions.

What does this shipwreck teach us about 1. ourselves; 2. our contemporary society ; and 3. our faith – and how faith can make sense of the shipwrecks in our own lives and relationships.

Few of us are untouched.

Half of our marriages now end up on the rocks, 800,000 of our children are marooned with no contact with their fathers, every three minutes we throw overboard an unborn child; and just over a million people aged over 65 say they always, or often, feel lonely.

83,618 people are shipwrecked in our prisons, while, each year 300,000 people are in contact with drug and alcohol services, and 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem. 32,000 households are homeless – too many rough sleeping, without a berth.

Globally, there is a rising tide of displacement – with a staggering 70 million people displaced or refugees – with 37,000 more joining them every day.

About one in nine people on earth, that's 795 million people, do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life.

Countless lives are shipwrecked through these experiences: through indifference, conflict, corruption, greed.

Globally, more than 3 billion people live on less than two and half dollars a day. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children, never make it to the lifeboats, dying each day due to poverty.

Yet, remarkably, during all this suffering, the one thing which sustains so many people is their faith. There are stellar examples of goodness and kindness of people motivated by the love of

Jesus. I am just reading the remarkable story of Corrie Ten Boom who went to prison after turning her home into a refuge for Jews – or Maximilian Kolbe and Dietrich Bonhoeffer – whose faith led to their execution by the Nazis; think of William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and the Quaker ladies who battled against slavery; or women like Elizabeth Fry and Phyllis Bowman and their heroic efforts for prisoners and the unborn; Jackie Pullinger working with the drug addicts of Kowloon; Shaftesbury and child labour; Damian and the lepers; Mother Teresa and the dispossessed.

In their practical outpouring of radical love they would have agreed with C.S. Lewis, who learnt to see everything through his faith, even the cancer and death of Joy Davidman, the woman with whom he fell in love so late in his life:

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” He also said that *“God speaks through the megaphone of pain.”* I am in awe of those who have suffered greatly but go on working for justice, and reconciliation.

According to the Bishop of Truro’s recent report, 250 million Christians are persecuted for their faith today. Like the Copts beheaded by ISIS, 11 Nigerian Christians were beheaded on Christmas Day. And yet, throughout these terrible ordeals these people faith do not retreat into hatred.

Just before Christmas I was in Northern Iraq and Kurdistan went to refugee camps and met survivors of the genocide against the Christians and Yazidis; and met people like an Egyptian Coptic woman who was taking medicines and supplies into the refugees in the camps, regardless of who they were.

These are examples of how faith can motivate but we who have so many privileges need to be much more vocal in speaking out on behalf of those without a voice.

In November I was in Hong Kong, where Christians look in alarm at the destruction of churches in China, the nine-year jail sentence imposed two weeks ago on Pastor Yang Wi, and the incarceration and “re-education” of 1 million Uighur Muslims; and many wonder why we are so silent.

Some agree with the atheist who said: “*but how can you believe in a God who allows these things to happen?*”

The answer was powerfully stated by our former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, when he said, “*do not ask where God at Auschwitz was, ask where was man.*”

Faith doesn't create these shipwrecks, but faith inspires us to find answers, remedies, and solutions.

It teaches us how to avoid being beached, where to build lighthouses, how to build more seaworthy vessels, and how to man the life boats and rescue those caught in the tempests and storms.

Faith is the food for the journey; sustenance for the bad times as well as good; the compass and sextant by which we navigate the rocks; the sounding line to measure the fathoms and the depths; the capstan and windlass hauling us in when we drift; the anchor which stops us from being driven out to sea.

The poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, Gerard Manley Hopkins' masterpiece, depicting the loss of 157 lives is dedicated to five Franciscan nuns who drowned, having been forced to leave Germany by the Falk Laws, which compromised religious freedom: “*Rhine refused them, Thames would ruin them*”, he wrote.

In facing shipwreck one of the nuns puts her whole life into Jesus' hands and her faith is heard above the terrifying din of destruction as she simply says: “*O Christ, come quickly*”

The poem's Christian themes remind us that even in such tragedy consolation comes through faith that this is not the end.

These terrible perils of sea travel and the fierce power and the lethal fury of tempest, were memorialised for congregations when, in 1860, a Winchester clergyman, William Whiting, composed his hymn “*Eternal Father Strong to Save*” Having survived a violent sea storm, he was inspired by Psalm 107:

Some went out on the sea in ships...They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.

The psalmist speaks of the 'Leviathan' the mythical sea beast - voicing the fears they had of the deep. 'Save us' the Apostles cried' and Jesus calms the storm, demonstrating His authority over creation and He continues to 'reach out' as he did to St. Peter, when we fear we are drowning from the storms of life. Jesus doesn't want us to sat in the comfort of our Hobbit Holes never risking a journey.

Despite the risks of doing so, in deciding to follow Him, Jesus tells his disciples to “*put out into the deep*”(Luke 5.1-11) – and, of course, having trusted him their nets were filled with the most amazing catch.

But this is a call to trust God – to have faith - but not a call to abandon discernment or reason.

In Paul's case, before the shipwreck, he had specifically cautioned his captors not to sail, not to put out into the deep.

But they knew better.

The Bible tells us that St. Paul survived shipwreck on no less than four occasions. And if we follow Paul's example it entails seeking God's guidance; listening to God; speaking out; leaving what we can't change to the mercy of God. The story of the shipwreck also shows how faith can heal and by putting out into the deep, more souls are brought to Salvation.

By going to Rome – and the probability of death - Paul brings Christianity to the whole Roman empire.

God brings good out of evil - Paul's faith becomes the solution to the argument they had been having in Jerusalem about how to spread Christianity.

Despite being beaten, stoned, hated, derided, shipwrecked and imprisoned, Paul's faith was strengthened and everything that happened to him enabled and strengthened his witness for Christ.

Let's recall those events in a little more detail.

Twenty-five years ago, when my children were young, we visited Malta and had the chance to see Shipwreck Bay. At the time, I re-read the account of the shipwreck.

In the Acts of the Apostles (CH.28), St. Luke describes how in around 60 AD, they survived the wreck and come safely ashore on the island of Malta.

But, even before the shipwreck, the story is telling us something about wilfulness and authority, about faithfully listening to God, and the consequences of not doing so.

In a remark on which we politicians should reflect, Abraham Lincoln wrote that *"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."*

As we listen again to the story, Paul's shipwreck teaches us about the insufficiency of our own wisdom, about trusting God, about not judging and jumping to conclusions about people, about the importance of healing in Christian Ministry, about receiving and giving hospitality, about welcoming kindness to the unexpected visitor in your midst, how the seeds of Faith are planted, how even the most unlikely among us can become God's agents, and how faith is at the heart of solutions.

The year was 57 AD, and having just completed his third missionary journey, Paul came to Jerusalem, where we are told that his embrace of the Gentiles led to him being assailed by an angry mob who then hatched a plot to kill him.

Taken in chains before the Tribune and then the Governor Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal directly to Caesar.

It was on his way to Rome to answer his accusers that the ship is wrecked, St. Luke says that they swim to the island and reach safety:

“... we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it.”

As Paul collected some brushwood and lit a fire, a curious incident then occurred. Seeing a poisonous snake come out of the brushwood the islanders immediately jumped to the conclusion that *“This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.”*

The islanders were amazed that the viper simply fell off Paul’s hand into the fire and the apostle suffered no harm.

Reminding us how fickle public opinion can be and how quickly it can change Luke then says:

“They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god”.

Of course, Paul was neither of the things which the crowd assumed – was neither a devil or a god, comfortably human in his transgressions as well as his triumphs – even down to the undisclosed thorn in his side which he tells us, elsewhere, that he has to bear.

But in learning how to live with his past, and how to deal with his weakness, Paul had become a man of faith. He became the most amazing agent for change, trusting in God to make a sense of every adversity, to use him, and to use whatever situation he found himself in, to speak, and to work, through him.

And Paul believes in miracles – why shouldn’t he; and why don’t we?

He was living proof that miracles happen. And just as he had been healed through Ananias' intercession, in Malta, Paul was himself used in a healing miracle.

The doctor, Luke, records that one of the leading men on the island was called Publius, and provided accommodation and hospitality for several days.

We learn that Publius' s father "*lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him.*⁹ *After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.*¹⁰ *They bestowed many honours on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed.*

So, Paul's faith and the gift of healing had extraordinary consequences for those he met – but the physical healings – and after all, such healings by their nature, even that of Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead, do not prevent ultimate death.

These occurrences are a manifestation of God's presence and precede spiritual healing, opening the way to conversion of heart and mind.

And although the islanders gave Paul gifts as he sailed to his trial and execution, he left them with something that has been handed down family by family across the generations: the gift of faith. The people of Malta have never lost the faith which Paul planted. A gift that came out of what appeared on the face of it to be a disaster,

I've always had a special admiration for St. Paul and, as an 11-year-old, I decided to take Paul as my Confirmation name.

Amazed by his conversion story, his escape from Damascus in a basket, his subsequent escapes from prison, by the 10,000 miles he travelled on foot, and by his extraordinary ability to explain his faith, what wasn't there to admire?

Having been blinded on the road to Damascus Paul's subsequent travels and letters spread the faith like a prairie fire- and remain at the heart of orthodox Christian faith, whether Catholic, Protestant or Eastern Orthodox, a bedrock of theology, liturgy and Christian life.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul warns of the danger of jettisoning our consciences and watering down our beliefs. He tells his young disciple not to accommodate the world, warning him that "*by rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith*".

This admonishment, not to shipwreck our consciences, speaks clearly into our own times - when so often we collaborate or remain silent rather than risk our standing in the world; when we speak up on easy issues, rather than the tough ones, or court popularity rather than risk upsetting a world which needs to hear the good news that God doesn't make mistakes and that, even in our brokenness and shipwrecked lives, He believes in us even when we don't believe in Him.

In Ephesus, where I stood in the amphitheatre in which Paul's denunciation of the Cult of Diana led to the silversmiths' riot and his imprisonment, I was strangely moved by Paul's courage in making his faith the solution to the materialism and pagan rituals which had become the spirit of the age. Here is a man who has become fearless in his faith, who fundamentally changes – a man who is healed and goes on to heal others.

And he wants big picture healing too – and is clear that society will not be healed if we abandon the central tenets of our faith – not least that we are each made in the Image of our Maker and our human dignity, and very lives, are to be guarded by man because they have been made by God.

Paul knew that if we want to change our world, we have to change our nation. If we want to change our nation, we have to change our communities. If we want to change our communities, we have to change our families, and if we want to change our families, we have to change ourselves.

Change doesn't come about by itself – and those who have challenged or changed society – some of whom I mentioned earlier - or those who founded our universities, schools and hospitals – have themselves been changed by faith.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said *“I try to give to the poor people for love what the rich could get for money. No, I wouldn't touch a leper for a thousand pounds; yet I willingly cure him for the love of God.”*

My last thought is about the importance of handing on the baton to those who follow in the race; of telling them the undiluted story and why it has made a difference to us.

When my family visited Malta, I took with me *“The Kappillan of Malta”*, written by the Liverpool novelist, Nicolas Monserrat, famous for *“The Cruel Sea.”*

A gentle priest, Fr.Salvatore – the Kappillan - gives encouragement to the people of Malta, sheltering in an ancient catacomb during the horrendous bombings of World War Two, when an average of 190 bombers raided Malta every day and dropped 6,730 tons of bombs.

Fr.Salvatore gives the islanders courage by telling them their story –the story of how the shipwrecked Paul brought the Christian Faith to their island; how, in 1492, during the devastating Siege of Malta by 18,000 Saracens, led by Kaid Ridavan, that the capital of Mdina fell. 3000 were captured and many others killed.

Fr.Salvatore describes how, during this horror, St. Paul appears on a white horse and successfully rallies and encourages the people to defend their island, their faith and their way of life.

Monserrat knew, and we should never forget, that knowing our story; knowing who went before; knowing the rock from which we were hewn; knowing how others have faced the same challenges and ordeals – and maybe worse – and come through; and that knowing how the story ends – not on Calvary but in the Resurrection - the central message of the Christian faith - has helped them make sense of their lives and to find solutions.

Paul was smashed against the rocks many times. His extraordinary story, and this shipwreck, teach us a great deal about how to handle the days when we feel smashed against the rocks -or on the days when, in the words of the Psalmist, our "*courage melts away.*"

Yes, the story of Paul's shipwreck teaches us about ourselves; our contemporary society ; and our faith.