

Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul'. Acts 27.21-24.

As we near the end of our long march through *Acts*, we now come to one of the great set pieces of the book, the terrific storm which led to the shipwreck off Malta. The centurion was so keen to get his prisoners including Paul to Rome that he ignored Paul's sensible advice to wait until the wind had gone down. There's a lovely human touch here in v21 where Paul couldn't resist gloating and saying, 'I told you so!' ...

When all seemed to be lost in the despair of the raging storm, it was Paul, the natural leader of men, who stood up and took charge of the situation. Just look over to v31... and vv33-34... But here in v22 he did the most important thing: he steadied the men, stopped them panicking and put new heart into them, v22... It was Harold Wilson of all people who once said that 'courage is the art of being the only person who knows you're scared to death'. Paul was a great leader of men.

And he was a great leader because he gave the people *hope*. In this General Election campaign we are looking for a leader who will give us hope. As the spiritual leader of this congregation it is my job to give you hope. These are difficult days for the Church. The tide is against us. There is a vicious anti-Christian secular ideology which will do anything to undermine Christians in society. Numbers are declining. But it is my job to put backbone into the congregation and to focus you not on passing fashion but on Jesus the unchanging Truth.

So how exactly did Paul give the ship's crew about to perish in the storm real hope? He told them the *truth*. He didn't deny the danger they were in, nor did he scare them to death. The storm was so extreme, the ship would be lost, but they would survive, v22... I think we all know that GB has a humungus debt problem. It is the elephant in the room which no politician will face head-on. They seem to be in denial. But Paul honestly recognised the situation they were in. The storm was catastrophic. He faced up to reality, and told them so.

On the other hand he didn't scare them to death. Today we seem to live in a risk-averse world where we are perpetually being scared to death. We had the salmonella in eggs scare. Thousands upon thousands were going to die in a bird-flu pandemic. BSE and foot and mouth? Burn all the cattle! We're all going to fry to death. We just grounded every single plane for days because a volcano erupted. Good leaders stay calm. They don't overreact with 'We're doomed! We're all doomed!'

Paul had been in a violent storm at sea before, but surviving one does not mean you will survive another. So where did he get his confidence from? It was from God. An angel of God had told him all would be well, vv23-4...

Now the moment I mention 'angels', the Richard Dawkins in you will roll the eyes and say. 'Here we go! Fairies at the bottom of the garden'. I shall say just three things here about angels. 1) 'angel' is a Gk word meaning not 'fairy' but 'messenger'. 2) Angels, though rarely spoken of from the pulpit because we're all trying to suck up to Richard Dawkins for some weird reason, are actually mainstream Bible. And 3) why *can't*

there be a spiritual realm of beings which we humans are usually unable to perceive? After all, we can't pick up radio waves without a special receiver set. Before we start rejecting things as impossible because we can't perceive them, we should be a little more modest about human abilities. Shakespeare wisely said: 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

Anyway, you can laugh at Paul listening to angels if you like, but he was right. The storm was so serious that the ship was wrecked, but everyone miraculously did survive, all 276 of them, washed up on Malta (or Melita, as it is in the AV).

Paul was not only a tremendous leader of men, who could give hope to the people in their dire distress, but, much more importantly, the hope he gave them was based on solid foundations. I often hear people with the best will in the world, comforting people with the words, 'Everything will be all right.' But how do they know this? It is just wishful thinking based on nothing. Our politicians promise us change and hope. But what solid foundation is it based on? It is just whistling in the wind.

But Paul was grounded in God. It was not just the power of positive thinking with Paul. He knew and trusted the Almighty God as seen in the face of Jesus Christ. He believed his Word to be sure and unchanging. What God had promised in holy scripture was reliable. God never breaks his promises. Paul also knew that God was an almighty God who can do the impossible. He was able to come after him on that Damascus Road and turn his life around from a persecutor to a missionary.

Paul *also* knew that God raised his Son Jesus from the dead at Easter, *as he promised he would*. Wasn't it the risen Lord Jesus that Paul had met on that Damascus Road? From his own personal experience Paul knew God to be a) an almighty God who can do the business, and b) a God who keeps his Word. So when the angel told Paul that all would be well after the storm, he had no reason to doubt God. And in the event he was proved right.

Let's widen things out from a storm at sea, and from our forthcoming General Election. We live in a dangerous, sad, and unjust world. Our own country is facing terrible challenges and is in a parlous state. There is a lot of personal unhappiness out there. So let's follow St Paul and tell it like it is. But on the other hand, there's no need to plunge into despair, and say, 'We're all going down the tubes. The world's getting worse and worse. Let's just hit the bottle and drown our sorrows'.

There *is* hope. Hope is the world's greatest need at the moment. But it won't come from people in denial simply saying, 'It'll all be all right'. It is the job of us Christians to point people to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. *He* and he alone is our hope. It was Jesus who impossibly walked upon the water to get to his frightened disciples trapped in the storm-tossed boat. It was Jesus who was raised from the jaws of death to new life that first Easter Day. These are facts, and it is upon these hard facts that our hope is based. They point to the sort of God that we put our trust in. He is on the throne. He knows what he is doing, and he will walk on water to save you. It is up to you and me (Christians who bear the name of Christ) to point others to Christ our hope. So keep up your courage!