

Meditation: Facing Our Deepest Fears (Acts 27:27-37)

By Rev. Peter Hastie

On the night of August 20, 1857, one of Australia's worst maritime disasters occurred just a short distance from where I lived in Sydney. I would often walk near the cliffs where it happened, and sometimes I would imagine the terror of those involved who faced a cruel and unforgiving sea. The ship which sank, the Dunbar, was a wooden-hulled passenger ship from Scotland carrying 122 passengers, which tried to enter Sydney Harbour in a violent storm. It was late at night and in treacherous seas.

Tragically, the ship lurched onto jagged rocks at the base of the towering cliffs near the Gap. The only survivor, James Johnson, told of how a wave threw him ten metres up the cliff face. He was found the next morning clinging to a ledge, calling for help. He told the newspapers that 'When we struck the rocks, the screaming began – the passengers were running about the decks, all of them screaming for mercy. Almost immediately the decks burst open from the pressure of the water, the ship was rammed into pieces, and all on board were hurled into the foaming, terrific sea.'

It sounds very similar to Paul's experience of a shipwreck at the Point of Koura in what is now known as St Paul's Bay on the coast of Malta. Luke records the account for us in Acts 27, not simply because he was writing a thriller, but because he had more serious ambitions in mind. His intention was to remind us of how God planned to bring the gospel to the world, particularly to its centre in Rome, and how the Christian faith can help us rise above our fears in doing God's work.

How a Christian deals with fear can be a powerful witness to Christ. It is obvious from Luke's account that the ship's crew was terrified of death at sea (Acts 27:17, 29). However, one man clearly wasn't and that was the apostle Paul. Why? He was in exactly the same circumstances as the rest of those on board. He was also experienced the darkness of night as well as the howling storm. He could hear the waves crashing on the nearby rocks. So where did he get his strength to withstand the strain and how did he keep steady in the face of crisis?

Before we look at the source of his strength, I think it's important to remember that just because we are Christians we will never be exempted from times of crisis and foreboding. In the last two years we have all experienced daily fear and hysteria whipped up by the media and our politicians. This is sufficient proof that both Christians and unbelievers experience fear and foreboding in equal measure. Christians don't receive immunity from these emotions. John the Baptist was confused and disoriented after Herod threw him into jail, and Jesus was clearly disturbed by conflicting emotions in the Garden of Gethsemane. Paul also tells us that there were some very unpleasant times in his life. In 2 Cor 4:8-12 he tells us he was afflicted, persecuted, perplexed, struck down and constantly facing death. But he never lost heart (2 Cor 4:16). Why?

Paul reminds us that on the very night of the storm God gave him a special revelation through an angel (Acts 27:23-25). The angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Paul saw this as a special sign from God that they would be kept safe. And this inspired him with confidence to meet all his fears head-on. Reminding us of God's promises is a ministry of the angels. No doubt this was what the angels of God were doing for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43): assuring Him of God's help in His sufferings by reminding Him of the victory over sin and death He would receive.

If the angels' main task is to comfort us by bringing God's promises to our attention, then I think this should remind us to familiarize ourselves with those promises and learn them by heart. For instance, do you know God's promises in relation to His help in times of distress or failure? Are you aware of His promises of forgiveness, strength, help in temptation, suffering, weakness, grief and despair? God has given us these promises of hope for all these situations.

Unlike the sailors who wanted to escape from all their problems on the ship (Acts 27:30), God did something better for Paul. He didn't take him out of the situation; instead, He took away his fear and 'gave him a spirit of power, love and self-control (2 Tim 1:7). Here Paul teaches us that God ministers to us through His word and Spirit in the midst of threats and personal crises. He gives us courage and self-control despite our fears (Isa 41:10). He can meet your needs today through that same word.

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