

Down to the sea again! Acts 27.1-26



“Keep up your courage: for last night there stood by me an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve, and he said, Do not be afraid.” Acts 27.22-23

Nearly there! But not quite After three months of lockdown, regulations are beginning to loosen, people are busting to get out in the sun and down to the beach, and life is starting to open up again. But we're not there yet — not by a long chalk

And Paul? You can almost feel the tensions relax at the beginning of ch.27. Paul is on the move again — and he's joined by our old friend Luke (v.1), who clearly delights in knowing all the nautical details! There's an air of *Sea Fever* about these last two chapters of Acts: *“I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky ...”*. Or that other John Masefield favourite, *Cargoes*:

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smokestack,

Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,

With a cargo of Tyne coal,

Road-rails, pig-lead,

Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.

My Dad used to love these final chapters of Acts. I guess it reminded him of his days as a Met. Officer in the Fleet Air Arm at the end of the war. Naval life seemed to be an extraordinary combination of breath-taking efficiency and cheerful incompetence (I guess that's true of Forces

life everywhere). Orders and plans made on paper don't always match up with the practical realities on the ground. He was in Australia when he got a signal requiring Lieut. Earl to report for duty at naval HQ in Mombasa. His ship was sailing for India (which was more or less on the way), so he hitched a lift to Cochin, and then found another aircraft carrier heading for Colombo. After a few days on shore leave, he heard that a ship bound for East Africa had docked in Trincomalee. That meant a rail trip across Ceylon (as it was then) to catch the banana boat to Durban. At least he was now on the right continent, but naval HQ were very gloomy about finding any boats going to Mombasa, so he was told to take a week's leave — which he spent reading six months' worth of letters from my Mum which had been finally caught up with him after chasing him around the Indian Ocean. He finally reached Mombasa via an ancient, coal-burning Belgian coaster — four months after receiving the original signal in Sydney.

So after two years kicking his heels in prison, waiting on the whim of the governor, Paul is finally heading for Rome — though still a prisoner, under the charge of the friendly centurion Julius, who was presumably on his way to some Army posting somewhere or other in the empire. But Julius has to use his initiative to get his little troop of prisoners safely to Rome — and sailing the Mediterranean was no picnic, especially when the sailing season was over and the autumn gales were beginning (v.9). Their first ship is a coastal trader, threading through the islands and chugging north up the Turkish coast (vv.2-5). But at some point they've got to strike out across the open sea — so at Myra (on the SW corner of Turkey) Julius finds an Alexandrian grain ship heading for Italy (v.6). These were the tea-clippers of the Roman world, huge vessels that could take several hundred passengers, camping on deck over a holdful of grain from Egypt to feed the voracious populace of Rome. (The mosaics above are from the port of Ostia, where the grain-ships landed.)

It should have been a straight run to Italy, taking a couple of weeks — but things begin to go wrong from the start. Contrary winds delay them among the islands — the autumn gales begin to blow — you can feel the captain's frustration, especially when his passengers start giving him unwanted advice (vv.9-12). Wintering in Crete seems the safest option — but the ship is caught by a violent northeaster (“a tempestuous wind called Euroclydon”) and driven out into the dangerous open seas off north Africa. Things are not looking good (vv.13-20).

Life on board ship takes on its own momentum. The ship becomes its own little world, cut off from other kinds of reality — one in which the true dimensions of physical and spiritual authority assert their priority over the social and political structures that normally dominate our lives. “You should have listened to me” (v.21) was probably not the most tactful thing for Paul to say in the middle of a storm at sea! Paul was a nobody on the ship — a landlubber amongst sailors, a prisoner amongst the free. Why should they listen to him? He had no authority whatever. But the storm changed all that. And it was Paul, the nobody, who had the authority to say, “Don’t be afraid — we’re going to get through this.” It was Paul, the nobody, who knew that God was still there, in the midst of the storm — who knew that when *the floods lift up their waves, the Lord on high is mighty, mightier than the waves of the storm* (Psalm 93.3). Paul could say that because he knew, from a lifetime in God’s service, that there is nothing to be afraid of: not because bad things won’t ever happen to us (they will), but because whatever happens, *nothing can separate us from the love of God* (Romans 8.37-39).

God bless, Loveday.