

A Maltese welcome – Acts 28: 1 – 10



It was only after the ship's crew and passengers made it safely to land that they found out exactly where they were – on the island of Malta. The local people who came down to the shore made them welcome and got a fire going so they could warm themselves and dry their clothes. Paul joined in the search for firewood and gathered a bundle of sticks. As he was putting them on the fire, a snake which had been hidden among the sticks fastened onto his hand. He shook it off into the fire.

The local people immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was a punishment from the gods. They could see that Paul was one of a group of prisoners, but they did not know what offence he was accused of committing. They therefore put two and two together and made five. Paul must be a murderer, and having failed to drown him at sea, the gods were making sure he got his just deserts by arranging his death by snakebite instead.

Paul, however, suffered no ill effects. Luke does not say that there was anything miraculous about this, and it could simply be that the snake was not a poisonous one. The local folk, however, were amazed that Paul was unharmed. Once again, they jumped to a completely erroneous conclusion, this time that Paul must be a god himself!

Don't let's be too quick to dismiss the islanders as ignorant, superstitious pagans. Our own society can be just as quick to jump to conclusions about politicians, celebrities and others in the public eye. With the most superficial knowledge of people we brand them one moment as saints and the next as sinners, or vice versa. Our attitude towards our neighbours, even our fellow church members, can be just as fickle. We can be grateful that

God does not treat us in this fashion. He knows us in depth, with all our strengths and weaknesses, our virtues and our flaws, yet His love for us is unchanging.

Publius, the Roman governor of the island, also welcomed the shipwrecked voyagers as guests. His hospitality was rewarded when Paul healed his sick father. Word of what had happened soon spread, and the islanders brought other sick people to Paul for healing. Acts 28, verses 8 and 9, are reminiscent of Mark 1, verses 30 – 34. The Lord who had healed the sick in Galilee was still healing in Malta through His apostle.

A prayer:

Dear Lord, for all in pain
We pray to Thee;
O come and smite again
Thine enemy.

Give to Thy servants skill
To soothe and bless,
And to the tired and ill
Give quietness.

And, Lord, to those who know
Pain may not cease,
Come near, that even so
They may have peace.

(Amy Carmichael, 1868 – 1951)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: St Paul casts a viper into the fire - Marten de Vos (1532 - 4 December 1603)