

## **Info**

Spread the Word, catch the fire...

Keep up your courage

Acts 27v13-26 The storm in the Adriatic

15-20 mins

## **Preamble**

Good morning everybody. If you don't know me, my name is Andrew Kitcatt and I'm the Worship Leader here at All Saints. I'm delighted to bring you a short message on what I believe is the penultimate week in this series that I believe we've been going through since July. "Spreading the word, catching the fire": where we've been following how it is that Jesus' followers actioned what is famously called "the great commission".

Matthew 28:19-20: <sup>19</sup> “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember...” ...And I’m going to leave that there.

And as the Great Commission is coming from the Book of Matthew, we’re coming to the end of the Book of Acts.

## Intro

So, there’s only one chapter left, and we resume the story with two things - 1) an open sea and 2) a calling.

Therefore, I think...let’s start near the end v25 - “***So keep up your courage***, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me.” I quite like how the KJV puts it...

“***Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer***”. Sounds more Christmassy, I think.

I love this story because it takes place around Crete which is where Heather and I spent our first holiday together. Our favourite thing to do was to swim in the sea. As a Cornwall holiday-er, swimming in a warm sea was a bit of

a novelty. It was bliss. And the lifeguards informed us if it was safe to swim by using flags. Green for good, yellow for be careful and red for not on your nelly. And pretty much every day, we saw a red flag. At which point we'd return with heavy hearts to the all-inclusive bar for mojitos. Sad times indeed.

Keep up your courage: I want us to do two things this morning. Firstly, I want us to explore what's going on in the passage and why Luke was moved to write this passage. Why is this story here in the Bible? And then we ought to hear from the Word, what God has to say about courage. And what Paul says at the end is really quite remarkable considering that he is adrift. Lost at sea. [You can hear the Church of England sermon metaphors brewing already.] And when we look into this passage about the storm in the Adriatic, I want us to see that if you are sat here today and you know are a Christian, that you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation, you have access to a courage so deep and so profound, that no-one and nothing can take away.

## **So what's been going on?**

Acts 21 – 26: Paul spends a great deal of time in Jerusalem and Caesarea defending himself before various tribunals. The most recent one being with Agrippa the Great-grandson of King Herod the Great. That is, “Christmas Herod.”

And just a quick observation on this. Paul is preaching about Jesus, that Agrippa's great-grandfather tried to have killed. And his grandfather, Herod Antipas, had Jesus' prophet beheaded. But here, the person proclaiming his name, is here declared innocent. As Marge Simpson put it, sometimes God just cuts you a break.

But now he has to go to Rome because he's been granted an audience with the emperor, which of course you don't turn down, despite being cleared by Agrippa. Between Acts 27:1-12 Paul and others sail to Rome via Crete. When we get to today's reading, the centurion has gone against Paul's advice and gone with the captain's decision to sail further along the coast of Crete. From verse 9, it looks like Paul can see that the weather doesn't look good, and he has just been fasting for the Day of

Atonement. So, he's recovering, and he probably doesn't want to see his food supply go overboard. But the captain doesn't seem to share such consideration.

And so, they set off from Crete with the intention of going west along the southern coast of Crete. And because they didn't have Radio 4 or the shipping forecast back in those days it all goes askew, and they head out to the open Mediterranean. And as you can see, they eventually end up in Malta, but we won't get there until next time.

Luke goes into extraordinary detail about the amount of effort they put in to keeping themselves afloat, just so they can attend what is a, legally, unnecessary hearing before the most powerful person in the West. Acts finishes before Paul gets to see the emperor – so we don't get to hear the emperor's reaction to hearing all this stuff. It seems to me & indeed others that Luke is very much Paul's right-hand man here - "look your excellency, this is the amount of nonsense he's put himself through to come and see you.

No guilty person would put themselves through this when they could otherwise run the other way.”

Things get so bad that they give up all hope of surviving. Verse 20: “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.” No light, no peace, no navigation. So we really can’t blame them for getting to that state of mind.

And it seems to me that, when we read “we finally gave up all hope” that *does* include Paul. If we jump back to verse 10 – he says <sup>10</sup> “Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.” Paul, yes, even Paul, was at the point of giving up.

But then something changes. Paul stands up and proceeds to not only (and I love this) give the most brash “I told you so”. Verse 21 - “Men, you should have taken my advice...”. ...Told you so....” It turns out, an angel has been with Paul and has assured him that he will see the emperor, with all souls saved, but the boat would be lost. And we stop there with our reading, and I don’t want to talk any further about happens next in case it’s preached upon next week.

So, they've set sail from Crete and ended up in the open sea...not according to plan. But the trajectory is they've gone from giving up, to being of good courage.

### **A word on water:**

So, that's what's happened. Now in the background there's something quite profound I think going on here. Whether you're a regular Bible reader or not at all I will just say that when you come across open sea any point in the Bible, your eyes are meant to kind of light up.

"Anyone been on a cruise recently?" - well if you haven't, maybe I can tempt you with just a couple of offers.

P&O Advertising: "Discover must-see destinations offering famous landmarks, hidden gems and unique cultures. Book your perfect cruise holiday today and set sail..."

TUI Advertising: “Book Today! Fun, Sun, & Quality Time. Discover Our Fantastic Cruise Offers”

How could I refuse? My challenge to you would be try selling any of that to a Hebrew in the Ancient Near East. See what answer you get. Noooo – raised eyebrows aplenty – that's what you'll get.

Because in the Ancient Near East (and this is true across cultures) the open ocean was the place where “chaos” lived. Creation narratives in the Ancient World can involve a god or gods trying to subdue bodies of water. Take a look at our own – say it with me – the Spirit of God was hovering over the “waters”.

And God proceeds to spend two days separating those very waters from everything else – from sky and land. Suffice it to say, open waters are something that have to be dealt with – they're a bad thing. Unruly, dangerous. Chaos needs to go. So when we when we read about Paul going onto a boat to an open, treacherous sea, by now we would be right to roll our eyes and say “well this won't end well”.

And it's worth bearing this in mind when we read about say Jonah – how far he was willing to go to escape God. And of course, what of Jesus. Whilst on a boat, a storm arises and what does he say? - “peace, be still” and the



wind ceased”. He also walks on the water. Folks, these aren’t instances of Jesus capitalising on an opportunity, as if he thought, “here is some open water, I wonder what I can do with this to impress my disciples”. He was very deliberate – he was telling the disciples “you know that God of yours who controlled the chaos right at the start of the Bible – the thing that ONLY God can do – well I can do that too”. It wasn’t just a party trick, or even a nifty saving trick in a perilous moment – it was a claim to divinity.

### **Courage Application**

And the fact that Jesus is God made flesh, which we celebrate at this Christmas time, is outrageously impactful. We can go out and ask people around Bath what they think courage means to them, or what images come to mind when we think of courage. We talk about young men “plucking up the courage” to ask out the girl they are sweet on. The shy kid singing a solo on stage. A resistance movement in the face of tyranny. A soldier launching themselves over the trenches. A parent working multiple jobs to provide food for their children. I personally think of my younger brother – twice cancer survivor, now PhD in Edinburgh.

I know it is extraordinarily cliché to quote CS Lewis in a sermon, and I swore I would never do it – so I’m going to paraphrase, so I’ve technically kept my promise. He expressed that whenever we display any virtue, courage is always there. When we need to love, to be joyous, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and enacting self-control – none of these exist without courage.

One thing you may have noticed that each of these examples contains some kind of adversity. Or, more specifically, a kind of fear. I suspect, nowadays, that the biggest fear going around in our country is the fear of failure. And I would put money on saying that without God, that fear of failure is dealt with by simply denying that it exists. There’s this famous Charlie Chaplin sketch, where he is tethered to a ball and chain, and he’s clearly distressed, and so he just, buries the ball. You know, problem solved.

But there’s something circular going on: often the very thing that gives relief us from our fear is performing well in that which gives us our security, our worth. Maybe that’s acquiring money; hitting sales targets; high achieving children. And when we do well at what gives us security, that’s us burying the ball. But the chain is still there.

To give a very personal example: there were lots of fears for myself and Heather coming to Bath. A place we had never been to before. My two biggest fears are her happiness and imposter syndrome. If Heather is not happy resulting from a move that's happened because of a job I've gone for, I've failed as a husband. Peter Ward said before coming here "you seem like the ideal candidate", and my fear is for the day where it's discovered I might not be. This is the definition of imposter syndrome. On top of that there's the whole "how are we going to afford this life?"; "where are we going to live?". We've left so much behind, into the unknown.

So, as I finish: Let me share with you what has allowed me personally to have courage over this fear. Two things really: firstly, I mentioned earlier that God was made incarnate. That is, He came to earth as Jesus. One of the boldest claims of Christianity is that Jesus felt as we feel. Hebrews 4:15 says - "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." Money can't do that; job security can't do that; gold medals, victory in the field of battle, even the happiness of

our spouses can't do that. Only Jesus can empathise with our weaknesses, so I live for him. Not those things which really want nothing to do with me.

Secondly: listen to Paul in verse 25 of our reading: "for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me". Now I know that this is referring to a specific promise, made by an angel to Paul about the nature of their journey. But it is worth reflecting on what our future is as Christians.

Ephesians 1:13-14 reads - "<sup>13</sup> And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory." If you are a Christian, you bear that same mark of the Holy Spirit – you are so secure, nothing will take that away.

Remember at the start how I said left off the end of the great commission. "And remember..." Jesus said. What did he

say? “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Christian, be of good courage, for he is with you. The guy who stilled the chaos, he is with you. Who walked on the chaos, he is with you. As I we through the emotions, and we go through the feelings, we don’t need to deny them, as the world does, we don’t need to bury them. But let’s cling on to him being with us. Amen.