

Homeward Bound
Bible reading: Acts 21.1-26



When we heard this, we urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. But Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Since he would not be persuaded, we remained silent except to say, "The will of the Lord be done".

Acts 21. 12-14

You get the feeling Luke really enjoyed travel. The author of Acts had joined the party back in Philippi (20.5-6), and he describes this part of the journey with relish. Paul's journey down the Aegean coast feeds into one of my favourite fantasies — the one about sailing round the Greek islands on a yacht (with an expert crew, of course), enjoying the wine-dark seas (and the wine, no doubt), the white-walled villages, the turquoise bays, the busy ports, the islands slipping away one by one There they all are: Chios, Samos, Cos, Rhodes, Cyprus ... Just google 'St Paul Aegean Cruise' and you'll get the picture. (And why not? We can all do with a virtual holiday from time to time ...)

For Paul and his companions, it must have been a peaceful interlude in a busy and stressful voyage. These were not luxury yachts but coastal traders, working their way down the Turkish coast and finally across to Tyre, then past the headland of Carmel to dock and unload cargo in Caesarea. Everywhere they go, there are little pockets of believers, islands of fellowship in every port. Mysterious, unexplained disciples appear and offer hospitality all along the way. We didn't know there was a church in Tyre (v.4) and one in Ptolemais (v.7) — but here they are, an underground network of support just when you need them. (A reminder that Luke doesn't tell us the whole story of the early church — there's a lot going on behind the scenes.)

There's a lot going under the surface too. Paul's friends are full of foreboding. Everywhere he goes, there are tears and warnings — don't go to Jerusalem! Bad stuff ahead! You're standing into danger! Prayers and tears on the beach at Miletus (20.36-38) and again at Tyre (21.5-6). Paul wasn't all head and no heart! At Caesarea, we meet our old friends Philip (cf. 8.40) and Agabus (cf. 11.28) — all with solemn prophetic warnings. The theme is *binding*: tying up hands and feet, taking away the power of independent action — a nightmare, you'd think, for a confident traveller like Paul (v.11). A timely warning from God to take evasive action.

But sometimes we have to go forward into the unknown because that's where God is leading us. Paul has had the sense of being 'bound' ever since 19.21 — bound to

go to Jerusalem, and afterwards to see Rome. This was not a mission trip, more a report to HQ. Paul by now is more or less a freelance evangelist, answerable to no-one, proud of his independence, taking his orders directly from God's Holy Spirit. But he also has a strong sense of the inter-connectivity of the church (captured in the wonderful Methodist word 'Connexion'). There are churches everywhere — but they're all part of one church. There are Gentile churches and Jewish churches, urban churches and rural churches — but they're all part of the one Body. And what is true of the members of an individual church (see 1 Corinthians ch.12) is just as true of the Body of Christ as a whole (see 2 Corinthians 8—9).

So a lot of Paul's energy in these final years went into keeping up the links between his Gentile churches and the mother-church in Jerusalem, organising a collection from the Gentile churches to support the church in Jerusalem, taking with him a team of delegates from each of his mission areas (20.4). It was a risky strategy, though. He hadn't been back to Jerusalem for several years, and he wasn't sure how the gift would be received. When he set out from Corinth at the start of this voyage (Acts 20.3), Paul sent off a letter to the Christians in Rome, promising to visit them after his trip to Jerusalem. You can sense his anxiety from Romans 15.30-33: *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.*

Was Paul's prayer answered? We'll have to wait and see. Sometimes, all we can do is to go forward, knowing that the God of peace will be with us, whatever lies ahead. There's a church in Norfolk that has these words from the dark days of 1940 written up on the walls: *I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. He said to me, Step out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better to you than a light, and safer than a known way.*

God bless, Loveday.