

# ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

## WEEK EIGHT

### Acts 27.39-28.31 A new world



*The island of Malta where Paul's ship was wrecked*

#### **Read with your heart**

How do you feel listening to the final episode, in which inevitably the group, including Paul, comes to Rome? Are there any details which “catch” you? Are there aspects of this story that you relate to directly? What’s your own experience of sailing? Do you relate to the close attentiveness of Paul and the others to the Holy Spirit? What’s your story about this?

## Read with your head

At the end of Acts we read the story of the sea voyage of Paul to Rome (where he will die later on). There are 276 people in the ship drifting in the Mediterranean, probably between Crete and Malta, as we learned in verse 35. Paul encourages people to eat as they haven't eaten for 14 days and are weak. He notices that the sailors aboard want to escape: they drop anchor and lower life boats pretending to drop anchors from the bow. Paul warns the centurion and the soldiers that they will die without the sailors on board. So the soldiers cut the lifeboats free to prevent the sailors escaping the dangerous journey. In v39 and 40 Luke is very precise about the nautical manoeuvring needed and in verse 41 it is clear that the boat is not safely on land, but jammed between "two seas" in Greek: perhaps a ridge of sand dividing the water. The stern is starting to break apart and so they are wrecked.

V 42 the soldiers would face severe penalties if the prisoners escaped, (see Acts 12.19 for soldiers being tortured) so it is better to kill them.

28.1 This is almost certainly Malta. Luke uses the events here to set up Paul's final passage to Rome itself. In verse 2, friendly native Maltese are receptive to the gospel, emphasising the Gentiles' receptiveness to Paul. Paul is portrayed as straightforward and practical, this time by organising firewood. And despite being a murderer, verse 4, which all the readers know he is, he is a proclaimer of God's kingdom and conqueror of the forces of evil, by being immune to the poison of the snakebite. Luke makes sure we understand that Paul is also in communion with other believers. He has often been a bit isolated, in prison, visiting communities far from home. He is in Malta for 3 months (v 11), heals the landowner's (Publius) father and is part of the community there.

V 17 the "Jewish leaders" (*hoi protoi*) that Paul addresses have been up to now hostile to Jesus and the movement. These men are leading the Jewish community in Rome itself, a large community.

V19 Paul wants to be clear that he himself is not in opposition to Judaism. He says “my nation” (*ethnos mou*) emphasising the fact that, like for Jesus, this is an argument within Judaism. V 20 The “chain” Paul speaks of is not metaphorical. Paul has apparently been chained throughout much of his ordeal (from chapter 21 onwards).

V 26ff Paul claims the heritage of the prophet Isaiah 6.9-10, to be a prophet to his own people, and uses a typical Hebrew phrase to challenge the leaders, the same as Isaiah had used: that the heart of the people has been made “fat” or “heavy”. Hearing and not understanding, and looking attentively and not “seeing” are also common ways of expressing what Paul sees as rejection of his prophetic message.

V 28 Luke makes the point one last final time through Paul. Strong emphasis that the Gentiles have been sent *soterion*, salvation.

V 30-31, we learn that Paul is renting his own accommodation, that he stays for two years, but we don’t really learn the outcome of Paul’s case or what happens to him. In that sense, the ending of Acts leaves the reader hanging a little, if the object is to provide a complete history. But if it isn’t, if it is to make this point which Luke has been making all along, that the resurrection of Jesus has led directly to the charismatic experiences of Pentecost, which in turn has led directly to the widening of the message to include Gentiles and the heroism of Peter and Paul, then his work is done.

The account of Paul’s final encounter with the “Jewish leaders” is instructive. The leaders initially are neutral – they’ve heard some negative things about the new movement but they reserve judgement until they meet Paul. They hold a second more informal meeting and Paul spends a whole day arguing the case for Jesus as Messiah. In verse 25 they all leave, disagreeing with each other. The final word, so far, anyway, is one of rejection of the message. Luke leaves us knowing that nothing hinges on Paul’s success or failure in front of Caesar,

which will happen next, because Luke's not that interested in Christianity's place within the Roman Empire, more within Judaism. Luke leaves us seeing that the movement is becoming increasingly Gentile (although it is still very mixed) and that Paul is independent, and going from strength to strength.

### **Read with your feet**

The story we have read together has been one of tumultuous events, new communities with the authority they relate to shifting from the established councils to the apostles themselves. Paul has travelled something like 28,000 miles and we have got to know Peter, Philip, Barnabas. Shipwrecks, imprisonment and conflict with the existing religious leadership too. As you reflect back on the lived experience of time spent in Acts what stands out for you and what do you relate to your everyday life in 21<sup>st</sup> century London?

