

Homily for Morning Prayer

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STS General Retreat: October 15, 2008

Text: Acts 27:9-26

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

As a young person, it seemed to me that the church in the book of Acts was a place of high adventure. Jesus ascends, his energy, the Spirit, works signs and wonders and healings. Leaders were themselves led by visions and dreams.

And things happened when someone preached—like conversion. Or getting arrested.

The church as I knew it seemed rather tame. Were we really being true to the church of the apostles?

No wonder an English bishop is supposed to have lamented: "Wherever Paul went, there were riots. Wherever I go, they serve tea."

Is that a failing on our part? Surely as followers of Christ, we can only hope and pray to imitate Saint Paul's trust in God, and his faithfulness, whatever just might happen next.

For Paul was in chains on board this particular ship in the midst of this particularly frightening storm in part because of one of those riots.

So why did these riots erupt around Saint Paul?

Well, this time, late in his career, when he likely brought the collection to Jerusalem, he had discovered that rumors were flying. He had gone to the Temple trying to show himself a law abiding Jew, when someone shouted something like, "this man teaches against our law, and he's defiled the Temple, too!"

Goodness only knows what all they had heard. Paul preached to Gentiles, and Gentiles were by definition sinners and idolaters.

And it was rumored and believed among them that Paul was urging Jews who embraced the way of Jesus to forsake the law of the God of their ancestors.

Never mind that Paul issued as strong a call to Gentiles to repent as Peter had issued to Jews on the day of Pentecost. Never mind that Gentile believers had to give up their idols and *porneia*, and follow the parts of the Law which applied to them. Never mind that Paul did not call for law abiding Jews who entered the way of Jesus to abandon the Law, though it was not to be a way of salvation.

And because he had been seen in Jerusalem associating with a Gentile, he was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into a restricted area of the Temple, a capital offense. This was, of course,

trumped up.

He had advocated for not circumcising Gentile believers and people thought he was telling Jewish parents not to circumcise their children.

People do jump to conclusions.

It's a bit like when you pay attention to the commands of God and wind up regarded as a Bible-thumping fundamentalist.

Or like when, because you're not antinomian, you're told you don't have compassion.

Paul was no antinomian. But that had not stopped him from nearly being killed by the mob, torn apart by the crowd as a Gentile loving traitor.

When Paul was snatched from death at the hands of the mob by a tribune, he told them about his education in the law, the zeal with which he had persecuted the way of Jesus. He recalled the great light and the voice from heaven.

The one speaking was the risen Jesus, whom Paul had been persecuting, because Jesus and his people were all one.

Paul hadn't spoken much further before—you guessed it—the riot erupted again.

From our perspective, Paul's pious background meant that far from being soft on the law, he was the right person for the Gentile mission, for hammering out theology and ethics for the young communities.

Paul, in baptism, both died to the Law as a way of salvation and rose to new life in Christ.

The ripples of his repentance were felt throughout the young church that had feared him.

If we follow his course in Acts, we see that there was continuity with the past, too. Everything that Paul had treasured about God's rescuing a people, all the prophets and promises had been leading up to the Just One, Jesus, the Righteous Sufferer, who took the judgment of God's people—of all sinners including every one of us—onto himself at the cross, and whom God raised from death on the third day.

I might mention that in addition to riots and chains following Paul, he had already been shipwrecked. Three times. He was called to suffer for the name of Jesus, which is why, after being rescued from the Jerusalem mob, but then kept for two years in a Roman prison in Caesarea, he was smack in the middle of a typhoon.

And it is not all tea parties in the corners of the church where we serve. Or all riots, either. We may feel like Paul on the deck of that ship, with the tackle and the cargo going over.

Paul's warnings had not been heeded, just as sometimes we feel marginalized by people and forces over which we have no control. Right now, our people are trying to ride out the storms of cultural

shifts and dissensions in the church.

And trying, like Paul, to preach both the radicality of God's grace and faithfulness to God's law probably stirs rather than stills those storms.

But however the typhoon and its dark powers raged they did not prevent Paul from ultimately making his way to Rome. And they did not prevent him from speaking a word of encouragement to those battered by the storm after all hope of being saved had been lost.

Paul permitted himself an "I told you so" then told them of a vision in the night. Yes the cargo was already gone, but an angel told Paul that while the ship, in spite of all they had done to secure it, would not make it through the storm, their own lives would be spared. God's word *would* be spoken in Rome.

And from there it could spread to the ends of the earth.

Which should reassure us, beloved sisters and brothers, that even Paul's chains, even the riots, even the worst that the wind and the waves could do, *even utter shipwreck*, was not beyond the providential hand of God.

The God to whom Paul belonged and whom he served is the same God to whom we belong and whom we serve. God has already brought us through the waters of our baptism from death to life, and God remains faithful.

Paul would not be destroyed however great the adversity to come; instead, in the thick of the storm, he was still on the course God had set, and would have the opportunity to give bold witness to the one hope of all the saints.

God helping us, we are called and ordained to make that same witness. Which is why we are so blessed to have each other.

We don't come together as a Society to seek excitement, or because life in the church of our day—or in our world—is too tame a thing.

But we do pray, that in the days ahead, *if God wills*, the *quiet riot* of our continued life together as a Society will send ripples across the church.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Society of the Holy Trinity

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