

“A POSTCARD FROM TROAS”

Acts 20:1-12

Last summer, some of you may recall, Liz led us through a short series based on the journeys of St Paul, entitled “*A Postcard from ...*” Well, we didn’t manage to exhaust the accounts of Paul’s travels and this summer we’re going to pick up from where we left off with a few more postcards from those places around the Mediterranean where Paul and his companions found themselves in the few years after Jesus had returned to heaven. Throughout August we’ll be looking at five more episodes from the life of the apostle and seeing if they have anything to say to us today.

We’re starting off this morning around the mid ‘50s – so about twenty years or so after the ministry of Jesus – and Paul is on the third of his major missionary journeys, the last main campaign before he set off on the long journey to Rome and his appearance before Caesar. Luke, the doctor who has been part of Paul’s little entourage for quite some time, is the narrator, as he sets down for the benefit of his patron Theophilus an account of the early days of the Christian Church. The part of his story that we’re looking at today is, in some ways, quite a humdrum episode in the story of the Church, but that doesn’t mean that it has nothing to say to us today, nothing to tell us about God and the way he works in our world.

In the previous chapter there has been an account of Paul’s time in Ephesus, on the Aegean coast of what is now Turkey. Paul has preached the gospel and that has had an effect not only on the spiritual lives of his hearers, but also on the economic life of the city. After Paul has preached against idolatry and false gods, the bottom falls out of the religious knick-knacks market which has grown up around the cult of the goddess Diana and the local trades guilds and tourist board are clearly upset that their livelihood has been badly affected. It’s not long before there’s a full-scale riot and the city council gets involved. Luke doesn’t actually tell us what the outcome of it all is – presumably the trade in religious souvenirs didn’t die out completely as there’s still plenty of it going on today, on way and another.

All Luke tells us is that “*the uproar ended*” and Paul felt it was time to move on. It’s not clear whether he felt his life was in danger (there’s no real indication that it was) or whether he felt his mission there was accomplished, but he went down to the docks and caught a boat across the Aegean to Macedonia in the northern part of what is now Greece. Luke doesn’t fill in a great deal of detail here, other than to say that the apostle spent time “*speaking words of encouragement to the people*”, which implies that he was visiting Christians and helping to build them up in their faith, rather than preaching to gospel to win new converts.

While he was in Macedonia he wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth, down in the southern part of Greece, telling them that he was on his way. We know that, not from this part of *Acts*, but from the letters to the Corinthians. It was the letter that we call *2 Corinthians* that he wrote in Macedonia, and if you have read that letter, you’ll know that relations between him and the Christians there were not terribly warm at this time. Eventually, Paul arrived in Corinth itself – Luke says “*he finally arrived in Greece*” – and, probably because it was by now winter, stayed three months. During that time he wrote the *Letter to the Romans*, sorted out the difficulties with the members of the church in Corinth and continued collecting money to take with him back to Jerusalem to help the Christians there who were suffering at the time. That’s all in *2 Corinthians*, too.

It all seems pretty routine, doesn’t it? In many ways, it’s like the prayer letters we so often get from missionaries today. Paul’s work was taken up with preaching and teaching, sorting out problems in the churches, writing letters and raising funds. Luke even ends up padding out his account with a list of names of the travelling companions. Any of you who ever heard Sir Clement Freud on *Just A Minute* will know that he was a master of padding out his time with long lists of things. Well, here Luke takes up a few lines mentioning the different (and diverse) people who made up the entourage of the Apostle Paul. And it’s clear that he himself is back in the party as the pronoun changes to “*we*” in these verses.

But, it has to be said, that's what most ministry work involves. It's great to have the spectacular and the dramatic, the stories of revivals and awakenings, the statistics of conversions and healing – but most of the time doing the will of God is pretty ordinary. That doesn't mean to say it's not worthwhile, but there's not always a lot to write home about.

And then things start to hot up again. Paul was intending to go straight from southern Greece across the Mediterranean back to Syria and on to Jerusalem, but he got wind of a plot got together by some of the Jewish people who opposed his message. We don't know what it entailed – you never do, do you? All that we hear on the news is that a plot has been foiled. Maybe they were going to murder him on board ship. Maybe there was some plan to destroy the ship or meet it at some point en route or at its destination and do away with Paul there. Whatever the plan, Paul managed to foil it by taking a different route and going back overland, back up through Greece to Macedonia, taking a ship across the Aegean again, and then working down the west coast of Asia Minor (or Turkey, as we now know it).

The group of missionaries ends up in the town of Troas, from which comes this morning's postcard. It's a town on the coast of Asia Minor, up near the route into the Black Sea. At this time it was the principal seaport of northwest Asia Minor, not far from Ilium (or Troy). The fact that it had a wonderful natural harbour meant that a city soon grew up around it and it was a very prosperous place because it controlled most of the shipping routes through the Hellespont. Like so many other places mentioned in the Bible, it's now a deserted ruin.

Paul and his group had been there before and there was clearly already an established church, because on the Sunday they met with local people for the communion service and worship. By the way Luke describes it, it would seem that there was by this stage a regular pattern of Sunday worship which included sharing communion together. And within that context Paul was given the opportunity to preach. As he was a big name speaker, they were prepared to listen to him for quite a while. We don't know what time he started, but he was still going at midnight. Clearly this was in the days before having to get home in time to put the lunch on, or having to be outside waiting for a lift, or getting the children to work. Luke adds the detail that *“there were many lamps in the upstairs room where they were meeting”*, so we get a picture of a warm glow, with probably a strong smell of fumes in the air. Added to that, Luke says that *“Paul talked on and on”*. He doesn't say what he was talking about, which might suggest he wasn't really listening to it. I think we get the drift, don't we?

Sitting on one of the wide window sills was a young man called Eutychus, of whom nothing else is known, other than the fact that he nodded off in the warmth of the lamps and with Paul's voice droning on in the background. And it wasn't the kind of drifting on the edge of consciousness that we all experience from time to time, I'm sure – indeed, some of you are there now, aren't you? There was an old man at the church I grew up in, a man called Mr Allnutt (remarkable in my memory for having the hairiest neck I have ever seen). As the preacher gave of his all at the front, Mr Allnutt's head would droop lower and lower until it rested on the back of the pew in front. I recall one evening when the preacher paused for dramatic effect, then shouted his next line and Mr Allnutt's head shot up, he grabbed his hymn book and sprang to his feet.

Eutychus was gone – in pretty well every sense. The people sitting around him suddenly heard a heavy thud from the street outside and turned to see that young Eutychus was no longer there. I suppose they may have initially thought he'd got desperate and jumped. Long sermons can lead to desperate measures, can't they? The story is told of a meeting in which the preacher was droning on and on, long after the time he'd been given. People were getting restless and clearly no longer following what was being said. Even the deacons, who were sat at the front behind the preacher were having difficulty keeping awake. Eventually one of the congregation got so exasperated that he picked up a hymnbook and threw it at the preacher, hoping it might alert him to the fact that he should have finished. Unfortunately, the hymnbook missed the preacher and hit the deacon sitting beside him, who had dozed off. The preacher continued, oblivious to the disturbance, while the old deacon shouted, “Hit me again! I can still hear him!”

Anyway, Eutychus had not jumped, but fallen from a high window and been killed. Naturally that caused a bit of stir and Paul went down to see what had happened. Now Dr Luke was part of the congregation that evening, so he would have been able to vouch for the fact that this person was dead. But Paul wrapped his arms around the young man and said, as Jesus had said to Jairus's family about his daughter, "Don't worry! He's alive." Eutychus got up went back upstairs with them all, and they continued as if nothing had happened. Paul broke bread and then kept going until it was daylight – another four or five hours. But when they finally broke up and went off home, we are told that the people were "greatly comforted". Pauls' words – and the miracle of Eutychus' resurrection – had had a profound effect on them and that was a means of strengthening them for their own Christian lives.

All well and good: a mildly diverting and rather amusing story about Paul. Why's Luke included it in his writing? Is it there for light relief? Is it just that Luke is making sure he misses nothing out in this story of the developing Church? Well, he misses out an awful lot more. The clue is in the introduction to his work. No doubt many of you will know that *Acts* doesn't stand alone in the New Testament. It's part of what many people think was intended to be a three-part work. *Acts* finishes very abruptly giving the impression that there was more to follow. But the first part was *The Gospel of Luke*, which tells the story of Jesus' life and ministry, and it begins with a few words to Luke's patron, Theophilus, in which he says that he has written the book "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (*Luke 1:4*). In other words, the gospel and *Acts* (and the subsequent lost or unfinished book) are written to enable Theophilus as a believer to see that the beliefs which he held as a follower of Jesus Christ actually make a difference in real life.

You see, the passage we have looked at today speaks very clearly, I think, of the ways in which God is at work in every part of our lives. He is a sovereign God who can be relied on to help us whatever might be happening. Here we see Paul and his companions dealing with the very routine pattern of life. OK, so it's a life devoted to ministry, but I would suggest that the same holds true for all of us. As he made his way through Macedonia and Greece – teaching, preaching, encouraging, writing letters, dealing with difficult people, enjoying the company of friends, doing the things that he did – God was with him, watching over him, protecting him, helping him, guiding him. And God is with us as his people. Life may not be very exciting for you at the moment. It may seem a bit routine, a bit monotonous – but God is still there, moving you forward, keeping you encouraged, resourcing you to live for him in your own quiet but effective way. Never assume that God isn't at work in your life just because things aren't getting all dramatic.

But if ever they do, if ever you face difficulties, God is certainly there at such times as well. Paul's project, if not his life, was threatened by the plot that was discovered as he prepared to set off towards Jerusalem via Syria. As we've said, we have no idea what the plot was nor how it was discovered nor how Paul was told of it. But it wasn't the first time Paul found himself in danger – nor would it be the last. However, God was able to help. An alternative plan was formed and Paul was protected. Things didn't work out as he expected, but his life was saved so that he could continue to fulfil the mission he had been given by God. At those times of crisis in our lives, God can help us. It may mean major changes to our planning or to our routines. It may mean trusting in God although we don't know where he's taking us. It may mean – as here – relying on the help and hospitality of others. But God will see us through.

And then, when the truly exceptional happens, as we see in the story of Eutychus, we are able to see God's hand clearly at work. Dr Luke tells us that this young man was dead. But through Paul, God was able to restore his life to him. As we encounter the unusual, the scary and the downright bizarre in our lives, we can trust in God to help us deal with such incidents. Sometimes the results can be as dramatic as they were in this case – and I believe we can trust God to do great things in our lives when we give ourselves fully to him. But for most of us, we have to admit, life doesn't throw up quite the same opportunities to test God's power.

Whatever our situation, though – dramatic, dangerous or day-to-day – God is there for us and his will is sovereign. As we trust him day by day, let's also thank him day by day for all that we see and experience of his love and power.

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Paul moved to Macedonia after the problems he encountered in Ephesus (see *Acts 19*). While he was there he wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth (*2 Corinthians*). When Paul arrived in Corinth itself he stayed three months. During that time he wrote the *Letter to the Romans*, sorted out the difficulties with the members of the church in Corinth and continued collecting money to take with him back to Jerusalem to help the Christians there who were suffering at the time. (That's all in *2 Corinthians*, too.) Paul's work was taken up with preaching and teaching, sorting out problems in the churches, writing letters and raising funds. That's what most ministry work involves. It's great to have the spectacular and the dramatic, the stories of revivals and awakenings, the statistics of conversions and healing – but most of the time doing the will of God is pretty ordinary.

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Questions for discussion

1. In what ways have you seen God at work in the ordinary things of every day?
2. Share any stories you may have of God's protection in times of danger in your own life.
3. The people were "*greatly comforted*" by Eutychus' being brought back to life. What kinds of things comfort you in that way?
4. How can we become more aware of God at work in our lives? How should we respond?
5. What is your reaction to stories such as that of Eutychus? Incredulity? "It was only for that time"? "Why can't I do that"? Unthinking acceptance? Share what's on your mind (be honest!).