

226 “Be of good cheer!”

In this Easter season of resurrection joy we cannot help but be aware of the stark contrast between the rich promises of the Christian Faith on the one hand, and the apparent prospects for this world on the other. For wherever we look in the world there are problems – many of them serious, threatening and growing. No wonder people are asking, “Where is it all going? Is anyone in charge? Is anyone capable of cracking all these problems?”.

The answer to such questions, humanly speaking, has to be a rather bleak “No”, for no politician, how ever gifted and well-meaning he or she may be, can do much to stem the tide, let alone reverse it. It means that the future of the human race and this planet lies where it has always lain, in the hands of Almighty God our Creator. He makes it repeatedly clear in His Word that He will forgive, restore, guide and bless any who turn to Him (two classic texts on this being Deuteronomy 4.30-31 and II Chronicles 7.14, both originally referring to Israel but now, in Christ, applicable to any repentant God-seeking nation, church or individual).

In Acts 21.15 we read of Paul and his companions finally reaching Jerusalem at the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, with Paul fully aware that there would be “trouble ahead” (eg. Acts 20.22-23 / 21.4,10-14). Sure enough, he was soon accused by the Jews of teaching “against the people, the law and the temple” (21.28), and there followed for Paul some difficult, trying years at the hands of his Jewish accusers and the Roman governors Felix and Festus (21.30-25.9) – riots, threats, plots, false accusations, robust defences, numerous delays - things coming finally to a head when Paul felt obliged to appeal to Caesar (25.10-12). After yet more delays (25.13-26.32) the time came at last for Paul’s voyage, as a prisoner, to Rome.

And what a voyage that turned out to be (Acts Chapter 27)! Things went terribly wrong, the crew had no idea where they were, and all hope of their being saved “was taken away” (27.20). It was at that time, when things were looking very grim for all onboard, that Paul “after long abstinence ... stood forth in the midst of them” (verse 21). He spoke with honesty, faith, courage and assurance, urging them all to be of good cheer, for the angel of God had told him that there would be no loss of life – quite some claim in view of their circumstances. Another fourteen days passed, (can we imagine the angry mutterings about Paul, and the nagging doubts possibly besetting Paul himself, during that time when their doom seemed so certain?). The ship drew close to an unrecognised shore; the crew tried to abandon ship; again Paul spoke up, and as a result hundreds of people were cheered up and had their first food for a fortnight (vv 31-38)! After the centurion prevented the guards from executing the prisoners (vv 42-43a), this extraordinary voyage ended as the angel of the Lord had promised – “And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land” (verse 44).

What an abundance of spiritual and practical lessons we are given in this wonderful passage of Scripture. The voyage did indeed turn into something very dangerous, with the prospect of disaster looming over them. Then it took just one man, a man of real, humble, practical faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to fast, pray, listen and then speak God's words into the situation, words of assurance, guidance and comfort. Yet things got worse, with Paul's words seeming fancy nonsense, before everything turned out exactly as promised.

In these threatening days Christ's faithful sheep are still called to "stand up, stand up for Jesus" as the old hymn puts it, a standing-up, as so many have found before us, that is rarely popular but is always necessary. For we know, on the rock-solid grounds of His empty tomb and our own Christian experience, that Jesus Christ continues to be the Way, the Truth and the Life, and it is in Him, and in Him alone, that all shall be well (eg., John 14.6 / Acts 4.5-13 / I Timothy 2.1-6).

So, thanks be to God, we are to respond to the anxious questions around us today with the old, simple message: "Jesus Christ knows where it is all going (*); Jesus Christ is in charge; Jesus Christ is the One capable of cracking all these problems". And what is more, His gracious promise still holds good – any coming to Him, be it a nation, a church or an individual, He will "in no wise cast out" (John 6.37).

© 2017 Faithful Sheep Ministries - www.fsmins.org