

**“Not one of you will lose your life: only the ship will be lost.”  
(Acts 27:22b. GNT; formerly GNB)**

At the beginning of the year – before all our lives were dominated by the coronavirus – I was reflecting on some of the challenges facing our circuit. These included: a number of our churches being over reliant on one or two people; the number of post-holders who had done well over their six-year stint (especially church treasurers) with no obvious replacements available; the challenges of making the circuit plan without giving a church more than one Local Arrangement service per month, and the fact that some churches were struggling to pay their assessment as our numbers slowly but surely declined.

It was around that time that I read again the story of St Paul’s shipwreck experience as recorded in Acts 27:13 – 28:10. As a defender of Paul, even I would have to admit that his opening words do not particularly cover him in glory. After the crew had been battling the elements for many days, Paul jumps in with both feet and in effect says: “I told you so.”

*“You should have listened to me and not have sailed from Crete; then we would have avoided all this damage and loss.” (Acts 27:21, GNT).*

Hardly the words you want to hear when you were perhaps both physically and mentally exhausted, having risked your life to save the vessel you were sailing!

**Hope**

However, in his very next sentence, Paul redeems himself with a message of hope that was not just applicable to those he sailed with, but surely encourages us all as it echoes down the ages into the lives of Christians today: *“But now I beg you, take courage! Not one of you will lose your life, only the ship will be lost.” (Acts 27:22, GNT)*

For me as I reflected on the life of our circuit, this was a wonderful image of the love of God. A confirmation that none of us who are following Christ will ever be lost from God’s eternal love or eternal presence. But some of the many vessels we are sailing in – some of our church buildings – may not survive the journey.

As I read again the story before us, I began to wonder how much the sailors heard of Paul’s message – or how much they wanted to hear. Throughout the story, \*despite Paul’s assertion that the ship will be lost) the sailors try everything they possibly can to prevent that from happening. They fasten ropes around the ship, they throw cargo overboard and they lower the anchors. They try everything in their power to save the ship – it means a lot to them. Perhaps they have sailed many journeys on it. Perhaps they have an emotional attachment to it. They didn’t want to believe it could or would be lost.

**The word that God speaks**

Aren’t we so often like those sailors? When it comes to the ships (churches) that we are travelling in, do we not also strain every sinew, strive in every way we can and do everything in our power to keep the vessel afloat? We can become so emotionally

attached to our buildings and so tied up with time-consuming events shoring up one hole before another appears, that like those who sailed with Paul we can miss the word that God is speaking to us when it is right in our midst. Or perhaps we simply don't want to hear that our vessel may not survive.

Since that time, we have all had to 'abandon ship' as the effects of the coronavirus are felt in all walks of life. All of the vessels in the Methodist fleet currently stand empty. Many of us are probably wondering what our vessels will look like when we eventually return to them. Will it be worth settling sail in all of them again – or will this be the time when we recognise that some of our ships will be lost?

However long it may be before we can once again board our vessels and physically, fully meet in fellowship together, let us cling to the anchor of our faith – Jesus Christ – and may the knowledge that not one of us will ever be lost to him sustain us all now and always.

May you know God's blessing.