

Our two readings this evening are linked by the theme of journey, something I have been revisiting recently whilst walking here in the Vendee with two of my fellow pilgrims to Santiago in 2013.

In Deuteronomy God reminds his people that they have been witnesses of his saving acts which have brought them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, saved them from Pharaoh's armies, provided them with food and drink in the desert and now brought them to the borders of the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, his gift to them. When they enter it they must love God and keep his commandments. Sadly, as their history shows, they failed to do so and were carried away into exile, then, on their return, conquered and occupied.

In Paul's case he too can look back on what God has done for him. In his spiritual blindness he had persecuted Christians, had them thrown in prison and approved of their execution, thinking that by so doing he was pleasing God. But Jesus met him on the Damascus road and in temporarily blinding him taught him the truth that he was loved and could be forgiven, if he believed in him. Moreover Jesus had chosen him to be his apostle to the Gentiles. Paul has come a long way since then. He had suffered beatings, prison and shipwreck, but Jesus had been with him all the way and he had seen many people come to faith. But for over the last two years he has been in prison. There have been plots to kill him, he has stood trial before the Roman governors, Felix and Festus, testified to his faith before king Agrippa and now he has used his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to have his case heard by Caesar. So we meet him at the start of his journey to Rome. It is exciting to realise that he has the company of Luke, the beloved physician, the author of Acts and his friend Aristarchus, but even though he is treated with kindness by Julius the centurion who allows him to visit friends when they land at Sidon, so they can provide for his needs, he is a prisoner and has no control of what happens to him. So in spite of Paul's warnings of danger and shipwreck should the voyage continue he is disregarded by the pilot and the owner of the ship who are in a hurry to reach their destination.

If we read on we find that the ship is driven before a storm out into the Mediterranean for days on end until they throw the cargo overboard and despair of their lives. But Paul is visited by an angel who reveals that his journey is not yet done. The ship will be wrecked, but all on board will be saved and Paul will appear before Caesar. Paul trusts God. He reaches Rome where he is kept in prison until his eventual execution, but he never loses faith for he knows Jesus has prepared a place for him in heaven when his journey is finally done, 'for me to live is Christ to die is gain.'

And what of our journey? We, like Paul, by the grace of God, have met with the risen Jesus and know his love and forgiveness. He has called us to be, each one of us in our own way, using the gifts he has given us, his disciples. He has brought us to this stage on our journey, meeting together to worship him this evening. There have been joys and sorrows for us all along the way and there will be more to come as we journey on, but we, like Paul, know that, come what may, nothing will be able to separate us from God's love for us in Christ. So let us thank him for our journey so far and for all those people, places and events which have helped us to reach this point and look forward in confident faith to our future journey, for the best is yet to come. Whatever storms may threaten us, whatever pains we may suffer, even death itself, will not prevent Jesus from bringing us safely to the place he has already prepared for us in heaven where we will see him face to face. Thanks be to God.