January 2020

"They showed us unusual kindness." (Acts 28:2)

After two weeks adrift, 267 shipwrecked people finally reached the shores of a Mediterranean island. They were soaking wet, exhausted and terrified. In their near brush with death, they had experienced their powerlessness against the forces of nature. Among them was a prisoner heading toward Rome to undergo the judgment of the emperor.

This isn't one of today's news stories. It happened to St. Paul the Apostle, who was being taken to Rome, where he would crown his mission as an evangelizer through the witness of martyrdom.

He was sustained by his unshakable faith in divine providence. Despite being a prisoner himself, he managed to support and to encourage all his companions in their misfortune, until they ran aground on a beach in Malta.

The people of the island welcomed them and lit a huge bonfire so that they could gather around it and warm themselves. The islanders then looked after them during the winter for about three months, after which they gave them all they needed to continue their journey safely.

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Paul and the other shipwrecked survivors experienced practical care and kindness from people who had not yet received the light of the Gospel. The welcome they received was not rushed and impersonal, but genuinely helpful to the visitors, and showed no cultural, religious or social prejudice. This could only happen through the involvement of each and every member of an entire community.

The ability to accept others is part of every person's DNA, because we all bear within us the image of the merciful Father. This is the case for those who have a strong Christian faith and those who do not. It is a law written in the human heart, which the Word of God has brought to light and developed, from the time of Abraham (Gen 18:1–16) right up to Jesus' revelation, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35)."

The Lord himself gives us strength through his grace, so that our fragile will can reach the fullness of Christian love.

Through this experience, Paul also teaches us to trust in God's providential intervention and to recognize and appreciate all the good we receive through the concrete love of many people who cross our path.

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This verse from the Acts of the Apostles was proposed by Christians from various churches on the island of Malta as the motto for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2020.[1]

By working together, these communities support numerous initiatives that help migrants and people in need. They distribute food, clothing and toys for children. They give English language lessons to enable social inclusion. They want to strengthen this capacity for acceptance, but also to nurture fellowship among Christians belonging to different churches, so as to bear witness to their shared faith.

And how do we bear witness to God's love to those around us? How do we contribute to build united families, supportive cities and truly humane societies? This is what Focolare founder Chiara Lubich suggested in a commentary from December 1986:

"Jesus showed us that loving means accepting others as they are, just as he welcomed each of us. We can welcome others with their likes and dislikes, their ideas, their faults and their diversity... We can 'make space in ourselves' for others by overcoming prejudice, judgment or an attitude of rejection that may be in our hearts.

"We give no greater glory to God than when we strive to accept our neighbours, because it's then that we lay the foundations of fellowship. Nothing gives as much joy to God as true unity among people. Unity attracts the presence of Jesus among us, and his presence transforms everything. So let us approach each neighbor, intending to welcome them with all our heart and lay the basis for a relationship of mutual love."

Letizia Magri

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[1] The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is celebrated every year in the northern hemisphere from January 18- 25, in the southern hemisphere between the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost.