

January Word of Life

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

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Two hundred and seventy-six shipwrecked people reached the shores of a Mediterranean island after two weeks adrift. They were soaking wet, exhausted and terrified. They had experienced their powerlessness before the forces of nature and had a near brush with death. Among them was a prisoner on his way to Rome, to be subjected to the judgment of the emperor.

Yes, because this news isn't one of today's news stories. It happened to St Paul the apostle, who was being taken to Rome to crown his mission as an evangelizer through the witness of martyrdom.

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

They were welcomed by the people of the island, who lit a big fire so that they could gather round it and warm up. 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 others involved in the shipwreck experienced the warm and concrete human kindness of people who had not yet received the light of the Gospel. The reception they received was not rushed and impersonal but one that was genuinely helpful to the newcomers, without any cultural, religious or social prejudices. This can only be done through personal involvement and the involvement of the whole community.

The capacity to accept others is part of every person's DNA, as someone who bears within them the image of the merciful Father. This is the case even when Christian faith is not yet alight in them or has faded away. 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, right up to Jesus' striking revelation: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me".

The Lord himself gives us strength through his grace, so that our will, which is fragile, 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.

“They showed us unusual kindness”

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.

By working together, these communities support numerous initiatives helping the poor and migrants. They distribute food and 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 building united families, supportive cities, and truly humane societies? This is what Chiara Lubich suggested:

"Jesus showed us that loving means accepting others as they are, just as he welcomed each of us. We welcome others with their likes and dislikes, their ideas, their faults and their diversity. [...] We make room for others in ourselves by clearing out of our hearts any kind of prejudice or judgment or the instinct to reject them. [...] 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 and 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's approach each neighbour wanting to welcome them with all our heart and establish mutual love sooner or later with them."

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