

“Arrived OK after an eventful journey”. Ever received a message like that or sent one? Sometimes it is an overstatement but occasionally the message doesn't tell the half of it.

Acts 28:14 says “and so we came to Rome”. Paul had arrived in Rome and might well have sent the message but of course it wouldn't have given anything of the problems he'd had in getting there.

He'd had all sorts of problems in Jerusalem, arrested, tried and imprisoned. He'd been rescued from lynching and a plot to kill him. Then the journey to Rome had taken about three years and had included a shipwreck off Malta that threatened the lives of all on board. It was an eventful journey indeed. However it was one that Paul wanted to make albeit not in those circumstances.

How often it is that things don't turn out as you imagine.

On this Sunday as we think about our part in mission around the world I want us to look at Paul and his experiences and more his partnership in mission with the church in Rome.

### **1. Paul's ambition**

Romans 15:20 gives us an insight into Paul's mission and his ambition. He was a pioneer church planter. He preferred to blaze ahead breaking into new territory with the gospel message, seeing people come to faith establishing small groups of Christians and then moving on. We see that pattern in his missionary journeys. So he could say, v19, from Jerusalem round to Illyricum the gospel had been proclaimed. Now he felt the need to move on to new areas. As we see from v24 he had his eyes set on Spain – don't we all!! However before that he wanted to go to Jerusalem, a detour of about 2000 miles. That says how important Paul felt was the task he needed to perform in Jerusalem as he took this money provided by the Christians in Macedonia and Achaia.

So Paul has in his mind a lot of things and he wrote to these Christians in Rome to encourage them to be his partners in what God was doing in and through him.

### **2. Partnership**

Paul was writing to these Christians in Rome because he wanted to come and see them but not just for the sake of seeing them but so that they can share in and support him in God's mission. We see this if we look at v24.

#### **a. assistance**

The word assist means to help on one's journey with food and money and with arranging companions and means of travel. In other words he was hoping to find them a helpful staging post. He hoped that the Christians in Rome would support him in a very practical way. Yes he wanted to enjoy their company and as it says in v32 to be refreshed by being with them but then he was writing to ask them to partner him in the gospel in helping him with his travel plans.

As we think about our mission partners today this is one very real part of what it means to be in partnership with them, the practical support that we can sometimes offer. For the most part with friends like Michael and Nicki Duncalfe in Papua New Guinea, Mark and Penny O'Sullivan in Bulgaria, Patti Squire in Uganda and Christine Daniel with Interserve we don't often get to see them and have that fellowship and offer that refreshment that Paul speaks of here. However we can offer practical help, which is mainly through financial support. 10% of all the money we give here at Christ Church goes towards supporting these friends in their Mission situations and other things such as the Community cafe here in Basingstoke. It may be that we could think of other practical ways that we could support these friends such as writing letters or sending items they need. It is something we can look into in order to encourage them in God's mission.

However, as we look at the pile of shoeboxes here that will later this week set off en route to Eastern Europe, we see a very tangible way in which we are able to partnership with others in showing the love of Jesus to young people. Other people have organised the activity and other people will go with the boxes but our part, in collecting the materials, putting together the boxes and providing funding for them, is very important.

However such practical support was not the only thing that Paul wanted from the church in Rome.

#### **b. Prayer**

In v30 he urges them to partner him through prayer. “I urge you,” he said, “to pray to God for me.”

Here was a major move forward in his ministry and a huge mountain lay before him so he prayed about it and urged others to pray about it. “I urge you” he says which was a normal phrase in a pressing request such as this one. However, “by our Lord Jesus” wasn't and it shows both the authority and ground of appeal that Paul is making in that his appeal comes from the heart of Jesus too. The next phrase, “by the love of the spirit” seems to mean through the love for him that the Holy Spirit kindles in the hearts of the believers. The whole is a call to pray. That is obvious. Something big is coming up and he says let's pray.

He wanted them to join in partnership with him in this new venture but he knew that such a venture, indeed every venture done for the Lord, needed to be undergirded by prayer.

As we think of our Mission Partners we see them involved in all kinds of things. [did a Mission update earlier in the service] When she was here Patti Squire spoke of her desire to move away from involvement in the Mengo and Guluddene Units for Children with Learning Difficulties she has been part of for so many years and instead to see a healing centre built. That needs us to partner with her in prayer. The Oasis cafe wants to expand and to run more often that needs our partnership in prayer. Then Mark and Penny O'Sullivan are working in a home in Goran Koznitsa for 58 profoundly mentally and physically disabled children and adults. They are trying to close the home because they feel children and adults should be cared for in different environments and are through the Cedar foundation Mark has set up seeking to create new homes.

Here is a piece from an web article:

“The Maglish school/orphanage for children with hearing impairments is one of the many places that The Cedar Foundation, a brainchild of Mark O'Sullivan works. The bright yellow and blue curtains in the children's common room now replace the torn net curtains of before, the walls are now sunny yellow and bright blue with murals from a local Bulgarian artist. Blue comfy sofas and new tables and chairs adorn the room. Now the children not only watch TV here, but they are also taught arts and crafts every week by volunteers from the foundation. Basketball and football are played outside in the uneven and concrete play court, but that is for a future project!

Mark created the foundation in order for it to facilitate and enable the people of Bulgaria to meet the needs of their own communities. It aims to do this by creating equal opportunities for those who have physical and mental disabilities. This is achieved by spending quality time with vulnerable young people, by carrying out renovations to where they live, work and play and by working in partnership with existing NGOs, local and national institutions."

Michael and Nicki Duncalfe live in Mount Hagan that largest of Papua New Guinea's highland towns. Michael is the Crew Training & Competency Manager, supervising the training of all the pilots and cabin attendants, both on the Twin Otter and also the Cessna 206 and GA8 aircraft. As well as these managerial responsibilities he also usually flies the Twin Otter two to three days each week.

Friends here are just a few things for us in partnership to pray for.

There is the encouragement for us here to join with our Mission partners in prayer but also the lesson to note that before we launch into things we need to pray. That is an obvious thing to do and yet I find in life the opposite so often happens. I find I launch into things and then pray afterwards, if at all. Paul said "I urge you to pray for me."

And note what Paul asked them to pray in v31&32,

a. That he would be rescued or better delivered from the unbelievers in Jerusalem. He knew it was risky going there but such was the importance of the task that he felt compelled to go.

b. that the gift he was taken might be acceptable. You might ask why wouldn't it? After all he was taking money to the needy. But these were gifts from gentile Christians to Jewish Christians and Paul knew that they may well turn him and the gifts away and so create a huge division in the Christians church. It was important and he asked for prayer backing.

c. that he might make it to see them.

Well, as we saw at the start things didn't quite go as Paul had hoped. We don't know what happened to the gifts but we do know that Paul was arrested so he wasn't delivered in one sense but he was in another in that he was delivered from lynching, flogging and a plot to kill him! He also made it to Rome but again as we saw earlier perhaps not in the way he envisaged.

The whole reminds us that prayer is important and it is good to ask others to partner us in prayer. However, it also reminds us that prayer is not an automatic recipe for success.

Paul sought a partnership with these Christians in Rome in prayer as he wrote I urge you to joining me in praying.

However, it wasn't just that which really spoke to me as I prepared for this morning, it was the words "join me in my struggle by praying to God for me". For it seemed as I read those words, thought about them, and read through various commentaries, that Paul was not asking for any kind of tepid prayer but a whole hearted involvement which he described in these words of conflict. He was looking for those who would pray for him with earnestness, urgency and persistence. I think this has something to say to me and to us as a church. I don't want to get in to a situation of first class and second class praying - this is tepid prayer and that is struggling in prayer. But it raised the question of when do I, when do we, really struggle in prayer? When is that coming again and again to God in prayer for the same thing, the same event, the same person. It is good to have a variety of opportunities to pray as we do through homegroups, the prayer meeting, prayer triplets, the weekly prayer diary and the prayer guide. My fear in all though is that we as it were scratch the surface in prayer. That is we pray for something once and think well that's it. But here I get the picture of a greater earnestness. I get a picture of Paul saying let's mean business in prayer and especially over this visit to Jerusalem and of people saying yes we will pray daily we will pray with persistence for Paul as he undertakes this trip. Now I am not sure exactly what this says for us but I want us to continue to think and pray over this whole matter of prayer because I do believe that it is central to our life together as a church and our gospel ministry. Join in the struggle is Paul's call and I believe we need to hear and respond to that call.

Paul was calling these Christians to partner him in the gospel ministry to which God had called him through their assistance and especially through their prayer. We have committed ourselves in partnership with these friends, the Duncalfe's, O'Sullivan's, Patti Squire, Christine Daniel and the Oasis cafe. We should do all we can to make that partnership happen and especially through our regular prayer.

Today on our mission Sunday as we look at these verses we see Paul reaching out to these Christians in Rome to build a partnership. A partnership that could have practical effect when he came to them but until then a partnership in prayer as they joined with him in urgent, earnest and persistent prayer for the mission of God.

Today we remember our mission partners and look at our side of the partnership as we think about what practical assistance we can offer and above all our commitment to prayer.