

Sermon 78, Maltese and Roman Hospitality, Acts 28:1-16

Proposition: The Maltese and Romans alike show great love and hospitality to Christ in the person of Paul, His chosen vessel.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come today to the last chapter of Acts. True to form, I have at least two more sermons to share with you from this powerful book. We will have covered 28 chapters in precisely 80 sermons; not bad, don't you think? What I hope you take away is the certainty of the Kingdom. Remember, that's where we pick up the story today. In this final quarter of Acts, Luke is adopting the Genesis-style narrative of promise and fulfillment, where God's promise meets with threat after threat, but vanquishes them all in succession. The story of Paul's journey to Rome is just such a Genesis-style narrative. Paul decided to go to Rome back in chapter 19, and then for ten chapters met with obstacle after obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promise. One such major obstacle, of course, is the shipwreck on the island of Malta that Luke recounted at length in the previous chapter. Now, at the beginning of this final chapter, Luke records how the apostle was received in Malta.

Many commentators have noticed that Luke doesn't say that Paul preached, that people were converted, that Paul started a church on the island, etc. One even goes so far as to say that the text is all about how Christians can cooperate with non-Christians to make the world a better place. But I much prefer the comments of Luke Timothy Johnson, who points at that by this point in the story, Luke doesn't need to tell us that Paul preached and planted a church. Instead, Luke shows us the symbols that he has used time after time in his two-volume work. If you look, the marks are there. The natives received Paul; they showed hospitality; and they ruled money, showing generosity with their possessions toward the mighty apostle and his companions. Taken together, these three symbols leave no doubt: The Maltese show major evidence of conversion. The Son and Spirit of God were at work on this island, converting the Maltese and bringing them into the Kingdom.

I. Welcome in Malta

A. Maltese Philanthropy Receives Christ's Apostle, vv. 1-2

The key verse for understanding what's going on in this passage is found in Luke's gospel, where he quotes the words of Jesus to the apostles: "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me" (Luk 10:16). Matthew's version is even clearer: "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me" (Mat 10:40). The words are not the same in Greek, but in the English translation Acts 28:2 records that the natives of Malta "received" Paul and his companions as well. The message is obvious: The Maltese welcomed Paul, and this welcome quickly went beyond simple kindness to shipwrecked travelers.

The original Greek says that the natives showed "unusual philanthropy," the kind of philanthropy that you don't often find. They built a fire, maybe a large fire that all 276 could sit at, or a bunch of small fires that all the men could cluster round. It was raining and cold, and well it might be, for this was probably early November. Even the Mediterranean has cold weather. Now, it's true — the average November low in Malta today is 63 degrees, while the high is 70. But for people who are hungry and soaked through, 63 does not feel very pleasant, especially in gale-force winds.

Malta, by the way, is a small, beautiful island in the Mediterranean. Today, it's an independent country; in those days, it was a Roman colony probably attached to Sicily. It was originally colonized from Africa by Carthaginians, and most of the islanders still spoke a Punic dialect in Paul's day. The island is tiny by Campbell County standards, being a mere 18x8 miles. Yet today, some 500,000 people squeeze onto that rock.

The love for mankind manifested by the Maltese was shown in their reception of Paul. That is the important part to keep in mind thus far.

B. Christ Revealed in Paul, vv. 3-6

Paul was useful. Luke has shown that he was invaluable on board a vessel in a storm; now he shows us that Paul personally went out and gathered sticks. He didn't sit by the fire and wait for others to serve him; he served them. I still remember Dr. Pipa speaking to us in seminary and saying, "You know, men, I watch you at church events. Do you get out the tables and put them away?" He shamelessly profiled our ability to serve as pastors based on whether we were serving at potlucks or waiting to be served. Brothers and sisters, the apostle's example is key — not just because it is a good example, but because it shows us Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.

Well, if the key verse for the last point was "the one who receives you receives Me," the key verse for this point is "But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles . . ." (Gal 1:15-16). The Son of God was revealed in Paul. That was a major part of Paul's ministry. By his life, his words, and his actions, he had the task of revealing who Jesus Christ is. The Father showed the world His Son through the ministry of the apostle Paul. That is true even of the somewhat mundane but also really cool action recorded in these verses,

where the viper bites Paul but does not harm him. The natives are ignorant and superstitious; no question. But they are on to something nonetheless. That something is this: Divine power is indeed at work in Paul. They are wrong to identify him as being a deity himself, but they are right to think that he shows the power and majesty of Jesus Christ, the one who crushed the serpent's head. Paul had power over vipers because Christ has power over Satan.

The Kingdom was revealed in this moment when the snake was cast into hellfire to burn up. The reign of Christ over the serpent was made manifest, even if the natives misunderstood much of what was going on. Like the Lystrans, they perceive that something supernatural is in their midst.

Luke is clearly setting up the end of the chapter, with its promise that the Gentiles will listen. Here are Gentiles who, unprompted, turn toward the power of Christ. Here is spiritual receptivity. It's not perfect, but it is moving in the right direction.

C. Maltese Hospitality, v. 7

Now Luke tells us that the first man of the island, probably a Roman administrator (notice the Latin name), showed hospitality for three days at least to Paul and his team and possibly to the entire ship's company. As we have seen several times before, for instance with the Philippian jailer, it is the gospel which produces hospitality. The Maltese "first man" or *princeps* was willing to open his home. Why? Luke doesn't have to tell us that it was because his heart had already been opened.

How hospitable are you? Somewhat? Very much so? Hardly at all? Acts is clear that hospitality is something you do when you have been converted.

D. Christ's Reign Over Sickness Revealed in Paul, vv. 8-9

We see more of Christ's reign as Paul proceeds to heal Publius' father, who is sick with fever and dysentery. Many commentators relate this to the "Maltese fever," from a bacterium in goats' milk. The fever has an average duration of four months but can last for years. It sounds like an absolutely brutal illness. Yet the power of Christ, exercised through the prayer and laying on of Paul's hands, vanquishes it instantly. The reign of Christ over sickness is manifested once again, here almost at the very end of the book. Clearly, Jesus is the champion who has conquered sin, for He can remove its effects too.

E. Maltese Generosity, v. 10

The final scene shows abundant Maltese generosity. The word Luke uses, "honor" or *time* in Greek, can also be translated "honorarium." In other words, the Maltese most likely gave valuable gifts or even outright cash, including "all they needed". It's not clear how long this gift would last; I'm not sure if Luke means that it was all they needed to get all the way to Rome, or simply all they needed to get to their first stop at Syracuse up on Sicily. Regardless, the point is clear: the Maltese demonstrate power over money. They rule their possessions and use them for the Kingdom.

Christ rules the elements; He also rules the Maltese. Paul's work on the island was effective in taking the already-philanthropic Maltese and turning them into generous and hospitable kingdom citizens.

Has the gospel had that effect on you? Are you generous? How about hospitable? Are you as certain of the Kingdom as the Maltese barbarians were? If so, you'll live like it.

III. Welcome in Italy

Luke goes on to tell us about Paul's arrival in Italy. The moment has arrived; Christ's promise of Paul's safe travel to Rome has been fulfilled. In one sense, this is no big deal, as Luke makes clear with his laconic "and so we came to Rome." Of course Christ keeps His promises. In another way, though, it's a huge deal. It's been at least three years and ten chapters of Acts since Paul formed his original resolution to go to Rome. Just as the birth of Isaac was delayed, and delayed, and delayed some more, so the voyage to Rome has been something of a promise postponed from the beginning.

A. Easy Voyaging, vv. 11-13

That said, once the shipwreck has happened and the winter is over, things finally start to settle down for Paul. The trip from Malta to Puteoli must have felt extremely safe and uneventful after 14 days without the light of sun or stars!

B. Welcome from the Roman Brethren, vv. 14-15

The Christian brothers and sisters in Puteoli, in Tres Tabernae and Appii Forum, were a huge encouragement to Paul. He got to see them and stay with them for a week. Again, as with the Maltese, he met with Christian hospitality. That caused him to thank God and take courage.

Not everyone was hostile; not everyone wanted to kill him; not everyone was in need of being converted. With some people he could just rest and enjoy the fellowship. That is what our church should be like. We should be a place where visitors can thank God and take courage. Again, in terms of Luke's narrative, it's clear that the Kingdom has already come to central Italy. Jesus reigns there, and the people over whom He reigns show the best of the Kingdom in their loving journey forty miles on foot to welcome Paul to their city.

Is there someone you love enough to walk to Wright to meet? That was how the Roman brethren, mostly people he had never met, felt about Paul.

This is the kind of bond that we should have with our fellow Christians. "See how they love one another!" I think we, as dedicated as we are to Christ, as convinced as we are of the certainty of the kingdom, are a little bit in awe of how tight the bond was between these Roman Christians and their apostle.

C. Minimum-Security Confinement, v. 16

Well, Paul gets to Rome and is allowed to live in his own rented space — probably a single room in one of the giant tenement buildings, but one that would give him access to the building's atrium where he could speak to large groups. It seems that the Emperor's own Praetorian Guard was assigned to watch him, and that he was chained by the wrist to a soldier most of the time. This duty rotated through the Praetorians, and so naturally the witness of Paul spread through the soldiers quickly. As he testifies in Philippians 1:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well

known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. (Phi 1:12-14 NAS)

The whole Praetorian guard knows the name of Paul, and the testimony of Paul. Even if they aren't exactly believers yet, they are getting familiar with Christianity. The message is getting out — and the Roman Christians are getting more willing to speak up about what they believe. Paul's confinement in Rome turned out for the greater progress of the gospel. That, my friends, is worth celebrating.

Paul received hospitality in Malta and was welcomed lovingly in Rome. That gives us certainty that the Kingdom is real; in these events, we see the spread of Christ's power as His reign takes in more and more people and places and bends them to His will. Amen.