

Muted Joy

Each morning, I wake to the sound of gulls calling high above our house. Their dawn chorus normally prompts me to think about Scarborough - either that I am looking forwards to going, or reflecting on the fact that I have been.

As a family, we spent a week in Scarborough at the end of August. When we arrived I was reassured to see that the landscape and hotel were much the same as when we left the year before, with just the added Covid-19 safety precautions in place to keep us safe.

Whilst taking a walk on the beach one evening, I finally managed to put my finger on what was different this year. It was the sounds of Scarborough. Families were on the beach, children were enjoying the fair, arcade music wafted on the breeze, but everyone was quieter, it was the sound of “muted joy”.

Everyone in the UK has begun to recognise the feeling of Uncertainty. We continue to have plans and aspirations, hopes and dreams, we no longer have that confident surety that what we plan will happen. We have become a little less loud.

I am reading a book called “The Kappillan of Malta”, written by Nicholas Monsarrat. It tells the story of Father Salvatore and his unceasing work to protect the people of Malta during the savage attacks during WW2. It also contains, through Father Salvatore’s sermons a powerful retelling of the story of the Apostle Paul as he ministered in Malta.

The book is set at the time when Malta had been bombed fiercely by the Italian Air force. The Maltese had been unprepared for war, with poor military capabilities, and the ceaseless bombing caused catastrophic loss of civilian life and dreadful injuries. The people were terrified and suffered dreadfully. In a desperate attempt to protect, encourage and empower them, Father Salvatore gathered as many people as he could into the catacombs through an entrance made possible because of the bombing.

Within the catacombs, people found shelter and safety. They also found the burial chambers of the first Christians who came to faith after hearing Paul’s preaching, when the ship on which he was being held captive ran aground centuries before (now St Paul’s Bay).

In an effort to calm the people, Father Salvatore told them a story about the first missionary to use the catacombs as his church. “The Apostle Paul”, Father Salvatore told them “was a hated man. He wasn’t much to look at either. He was small and wiry; he walked with a limp and had an affliction which caused him great embarrassment. He was easy to spot in a crowd. “

The Jews hounded Paul from place to place because he told anyone who would listen that Jesus Christ was the longed-for Messiah. Making Jesus accessible to all was not how the Jewish religion operated so the Jews made a point of following Paul and complaining to the Roman ruler in each of the provinces he visited. Paul was often imprisoned despite his innocence of any crime.

Paul was bad for business for the Pagans too. He once caused a riot in Ephesus; his preaching was so powerful that the sales of the silversmith’s statue of Diana fell, as people converted to Christianity.

“The Christians feared Paul”, Father Salvatore continued, “They remembered him as Saul of Tarsus; their fear and hostility left Paul isolated and in want.

“But,” Father Salvatore said, “despite all this, Paul was uplifted by his faith in Christ, and comforted by the converts he made. It was their boundless love and acceptance which gave him succour in his darkest days, and their generosity which kept him fed and clothed, and their friendship which sustained him.

“For me, to live is Christ” was his answer to all his life’s setbacks.

“Paul spent 3 months in Malta, Father Salvatore continued “He used these catacombs as his church. It was here that he taught the gospel. During this time Paul made a friend and then a convert of Governor Publius, later asking him to be first Bishop of Malta.

What is extraordinary about this story,” Father Salvatore said, “is that during those 3 months, the ship wrecked boat was being restored, and Paul was still bound to go in chains to Jerusalem. He would stand before Caesar, and likely be put to death. Yet, during this time, he gladly worked for his Lord. It is said that Paul was happiest here during his final days in Malta.”When Paul sail for Jerusalem, the new Christians wept, but Paul did not; he kept his face steadfast.

Centuries later and here we are”, Father Salvatore said, “afraid and alone on our island, facing great danger. I want you to know we cannot all be saints, but we can all be men and women of courage.”

Just then a man ran into the catacombs, “Help” he cried, “I need help. People are trapped under the rubble, they are calling for our help.” Quietly, about 50 people from the congregation stood up, followed Father Salvatore and headed out of the catacombs and into the darkness.

It is not our fear which defines us, for Paul and the Maltese people were also afraid; it is our acts of kindness, compassion and care which demonstrate God’s love for humankind today.

Anna Smith