

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2020

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

BIBLICAL TEXT FOR 2020

Acts 27:18 – 28:10 (NRSV)

We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship’s tackle overboard. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.” So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.’

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were drifting across the sea of Adria, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on they took soundings again and found fifteen fathoms. Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. But when the sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea, on the pretext of putting out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.’ Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift.

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.’ After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship. After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting

the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us round it. Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.' He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It so happened that the father of Publius lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him. After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They bestowed many honours on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed.

GENERAL COMMENTARY ON THE TEXT

The materials for the 2020 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity have been prepared by the Christian churches in Malta and Gozo (Christians Together in Malta). On 10th February many Christians in Malta celebrate the Feast of the Shipwreck of St Paul, marking and giving thanks for the arrival of Christian faith on these islands. The reading from the Acts of the Apostles used for the feast is the text chosen for this year's Week of Prayer.

The story begins with Paul being taken to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 27: 1ff). Paul is in chains, but even in what turns out to be a perilous journey, the mission of God continues through him.

This narrative is a classic drama of humanity confronted by the terrifying power of the elements. The passengers on the boat are at the mercy of the forces of the seas beneath them and the powerful tempest that rages about them. These forces take them into unknown territory, where they are lost and without hope.

The 276 people on board the ship are divided into distinct groups. The centurion and his soldiers have power and authority but are dependent on the skill and experience of the sailors. Although all are afraid and vulnerable, the prisoners in chains are the most vulnerable of all.

Their lives are expendable; they are at risk of summary execution (27: 42). As the story unfolds, under pressure and in fear for their lives, we see distrust and suspicion widening the divisions between the different groups.

Remarkably, however, Paul stands out as a centre of peace in the turmoil. He knows that his life is not governed by forces indifferent to his fate, but rather is held in the hands of the God to whom he belongs and whom he worships (see 27: 23). Because of this faith, he is confident that he will stand before the emperor in Rome, and in the strength of this faith he can stand before his fellow travellers and give thanks to God. All are encouraged. Following Paul's example, they share bread together, united in a new hope and trusting in his words.

This illustrates a major theme in the passage: divine providence. It had been the centurion's decision to set sail in bad weather, and throughout the storm the sailors made decisions about how to handle the ship. But in the end their own plans are thwarted, and only by staying together and allowing the ship to be wrecked do they come to be saved through divine providence. The ship and its entire valuable cargo will be lost, but all lives will be saved, "for none of you will lose a hair from your heads" (27: 34; see Lk 21:18). In our search for Christian unity, surrendering ourselves to divine providence will demand letting go of many things to which we are deeply attached. What matters to God is the salvation of all people.

This diverse and conflicted group of people runs aground "on some island" (27:26). Having been thrown together in the same boat, they arrive at the same destination, where their human unity is disclosed in the hospitality they receive from the islanders. As they gather round the fire, surrounded by a people who neither know nor understand them, differences of power and status fall away. The 276 are no longer at the mercy of indifferent forces, but embraced by God's loving providence made present through a people who show them "unusual kindness" (28:2). Cold and wet, they can warm and dry themselves by the fire. Hungry, they are given food. They are sheltered until it is safe for them to continue their journey.

Today many people are facing the same terrors on the same seas. The very same places named in the reading (27:1, 28:1) also feature in the stories of modern-day migrants. In other parts of the world many others are making equally dangerous journeys by land and sea to escape natural disasters, warfare and poverty. Their lives, too, are at the mercy of immense and coldly indifferent forces – not only natural, but political, economic and human. This human indifference takes various forms: the indifference of those who sell places on unseaworthy vessels to desperate people; the indifference of the decision not to send out rescue boats; and the indifference of turning migrant ships away. This names only a few instances. As Christians together facing these crises of migration this story challenges us: do we collude with the cold forces of indifference, or do we show "unusual kindness" and become witnesses of God's loving providence to all people?

Hospitality is a much needed virtue in our search for Christian unity. It is a practice that calls us to a greater generosity to those in need. The people who showed unusual kindness to Paul and his companions did not yet know Christ, and yet it is through their unusual kindness that a divided people were drawn closer together. Our own Christian unity will be discovered not only through showing hospitality to one another, important though this is, but also through loving encounters with those who do not share our language, culture or faith.

In such tempestuous journeys and chance encounters, God's will for his Church and all people comes to fulfilment. As Paul will proclaim in Rome, this salvation of God has been sent to all peoples (see Acts 28:28).

The reflections for the eight days and the worship service will be focused on the text from the Acts of the Apostles. The themes for the eight days are:

- Day 1: Reconciliation: Throwing the cargo overboard
- Day 2: Enlightenment: Seeking and showing forth Christ's light
- Day 3: Hope: Paul's message
- Day 4: Trust: Do not be afraid, believe
- Day 5: Strength: Breaking bread for the journey
- Day 6: Hospitality: Show unusual kindness
- Day 7: Conversion: Changing our hearts and minds
- Day 8: Generosity: Receiving and giving

THE PREPARATION OF THE MATERIAL

The Christian Churches in Malta were chosen to draft the material for the 2020 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In September 2017, the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference, composed of Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna of Malta and Bishop Mario Grech of Gozo, together with Christians Together in Malta (Malta Ecumenical Council), entrusted Mgr Hector Scerri with the formation of an Ecumenical Drafting Committee to prepare the material for 2020.

Gratitude is extended to the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference and to the members of Christians Together in Malta, and to all those involved in contributing the various aspects of the resources:

- Mgr Prof. Hector Scerri – Convenor and Coordinator of the Drafting Committee on behalf of the Maltese Episcopal Conference, Chairperson of Christians Together in Malta, President of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission (Archdiocese of Malta), Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta (Roman Catholic)
- Ms Dorianne Buttigieg – Secretary of the Drafting Committee, Member of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission (Archdiocese of Malta)
- Rev. Kim Hurst – Minister at St Andrew's Scots' Church, Valletta, Malta (Methodist)
- Elizabeth Lochhead – Member of St Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta (Church of England)
- Mgr Joseph Attard – Episcopal Vicar for the Laity and Ecumenism, Diocese of Gozo, Malta (Roman Catholic)
- Mr Norman Alexander – Member of St Andrew's Scots' Church, Valletta, Malta (Church of Scotland)
- Can. Simon Godfrey – Chancellor of St Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta (Church of England)
- Dr Patricia Micallef – Coordinator of Taizè Group, Malta (Roman Catholic)

- Ms Judith Pugh – Member of the Anglican community in Gozo, Malta (Church of England)
- Subdeacon Alexander Kuryshev – Member of the Russian Orthodox Parish of St Paul, Malta (Russian Orthodox)
- Rev. Archimandrite Nathanael Felesakis – Parish priest of the Greek Orthodox Parish of St Paul, Malta (Greek Orthodox)
- Rev. Ionut Iftimia – Parish priest of the Rumanian Orthodox Parish of St John the Baptist, Malta, (Rumanian Orthodox)
- Mr Noel Cauchi – Representative of the Evangelical Lutheran community (Andreasmemeinde), Valletta, Malta (Evangelical Lutheran)
- Rev. Dr Aurelio Mulè Stagno SDB – Member of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission, Malta (Roman Catholic)

The local Drafting Committee met in the Board room of the Archbishop's Major Seminary, in Tal-Virtù, Rabat, Malta on 12th February, 15th March, 20th April and 11th May 2018.

The material by the local Drafting Committee was presented to the international group composed of representatives from the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches. A meeting was held at the Archbishop's Major Seminary, Rabat, Malta, 13th-18th September 2018. Encounters were held with the local Drafting Committee, Christians Together in Malta, Archbishop Scicluna and the Apostolic Nuncio to Malta, Archbishop Alessandro D'Errico.

ECUMENICAL WORSHIP SERVICE

Notes for the worship service

As an island nation, boats are an important part of Maltese life. The Scripture reading in this service describes a perilous sea voyage by the Apostle Paul. A boat is also symbolic of the sometimes tempestuous journey Christians make together towards unity. For these reasons, it is suggested that prior to the service, a boat or a large model of a boat is placed in the worship space.

Given its length and technical nautical language, the reading from the Acts of the Apostles requires very careful proclamation. Consideration may be given to dividing the speaking roles among a number of readers, or the use of drama or other media to aid the proclamation. The text might be proclaimed from a point near the boat.

Order of the Service

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

- L Leader
- C Congregation
- R Reader

The Gathering

Introductory Hymn

During the singing of the introductory hymn, church leaders and representatives enter the venue for the ecumenical service of prayer for Christian Unity. They are led by a participant carrying the Bible for all to see. The Bible is placed in a place of honour in the centre of the worshipping community.

Words of Welcome

L The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with you all.

C **And also with you.**

- L** Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we have assembled here to pray for unity among Christians and reconciliation in the world. Divisions among Christians have existed for many centuries. This causes great pain and is contrary to God’s will. We believe in the power of prayer. Together with Christians all over the world, we offer our prayers as we seek to overcome separation.

The resources for this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity have been prepared by different Christian Churches in Malta. The history of Christianity in this small island nation dates back to the time of the apostles. According to tradition, St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, reached the shores of Malta in the year 60 CE. The narrative describing this eventful and providential episode is conveyed to us in the final two chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

This text signals the beginning of Christianity in Malta – a small country made up of two main inhabited islands, Malta and Gozo, as well as other islets – at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, halfway between the southern tip of Sicily and Northern Africa. This biblical land lies at the crossroads of civilizations, cultures and religions.

Our prayers and reflections, today, and during this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, are centred on the hospitality shown by the islanders towards those who had just been shipwrecked: “They showed us unusual kindness” (cf. Acts 28:2). May the love and respect we show each other today as we pray for Christian unity be with us throughout the whole year.

Invocation of the Holy Spirit

The response to each prayer may be sung by a cantor and repeated by the whole congregation.

- L** Spirit of love, come upon this assembly and dwell among us.
C **Come, Holy Spirit! (or Veni Sancte Spiritus!)**

- L** Spirit of unity, show us the path towards Christian unity.
C **Come, Holy Spirit! (or Veni Sancte Spiritus!)**

- L** Spirit of hospitality, teach us to be welcoming.
C **Come, Holy Spirit! (or Veni Sancte Spiritus!)**

- L** Spirit of compassion, instil within us an attitude of respect to all those whom we meet.
C **Come, Holy Spirit! (or Veni Sancte Spiritus!)**

- L** Spirit of hope, help us to detach ourselves from all hindrances to our ecumenical journey.
C **Come, Holy Spirit! (or Veni Sancte Spiritus!)**

Prayers of Pardon and Reconciliation

The response to each prayer may be sung by a cantor and repeated by the whole congregation.

L Forgive us, Lord, for past mistakes, mistrust and misdeeds between Christians from different Churches and traditions.

C **Lord, have mercy! (or Kyrie eleison!)**

L Forgive us, Lord, for remaining in the darkness rather than seeking the path of Light; for you, O Lord, are the only true Light.

C **Lord, have mercy! (or Kyrie eleison!)**

L Forgive us, Lord, for our lack of faith and for our failure to be people of expectant hope and authentic charity.

C **Lord, have mercy! (or Kyrie eleison!)**

L Forgive us, Lord, for having caused pain, hardship and anguish to others.

C **Lord, have mercy! (or Kyrie eleison!)**

L Forgive us, Lord, for isolating ourselves and remaining indifferent, instead of showing hospitality to all, especially strangers and refugees.

C **Lord, have mercy! (or Kyrie eleison!)**

L The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us (Ps 103:8.11-12).

C **Amen.**

Song of praise

Listening to the Living Word of God

L Father in heaven, open our hearts and minds to your Word.

C **Your words are spirit and life!**

L Lead us to grow closer to each other in unity and charity.

C **Your word is a lamp on our path!**

Reading **Acts 27:18 – 28:10**

R This is the Word of the Lord.

C **Thanks be to God who saves and who heals.**

Psalm **Ps 107:8-9.19-22.28-32**

A cantor may sing this Psalm and the congregation is invited to sing the Response.

Response: The Lord has delivered us from the mighty waves.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things. **R/.**

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction. **R/.**

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy. **R/.**

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven. **R/.**

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders. **R/.**

An Alleluia acclamation may be sung before (and after) the Gospel reading.

Gospel Mark 16:14-20

R This is the Word of the Lord.

C **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ. You are the Good News!**

A biblical reflection or short homily follows.

Hymn

The Nicene Creed

L Dear brothers and sisters, as we are united in the Lord Jesus Christ, let us proclaim our common faith in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

C **We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

The Prayers of the People

During the prayers, eight oars (or oar-shaped models) are brought into the assembly by members of different communities. Each oar bears a single word – Reconciliation, Enlightenment, Hope, Trust, Strength, Hospitality, Conversion and Generosity. The presentation of an oar introduces each of the petitions. After the oar has been held high, it is placed near or in the boat and a time of silent prayer follows. A reader then announces the corresponding petition and all respond.

L We cannot face the storms of life alone. A boat moves forward when all row together. In the face of difficulties we recognise the need to pull together and to unite our efforts. Let us pray.

In silent prayer, the first oar (Reconciliation) is brought forward.

R Gracious God, heal the painful memories of the past which have wounded our churches and continue to keep us apart.

C **Hear our prayer for Reconciliation.**

R Gracious God, teach us to fix our course on Christ, the True Light.

C **Hear our prayer for Enlightenment.**

R Gracious God, strengthen our confidence in your providence when we feel overwhelmed by the storms of life.

C **Hear our prayer for Hope.**

R Gracious God, transform our many separations into harmony and our mistrust into mutual acceptance.

C **Hear our prayer for Trust.**

R Gracious God, give us the courage to speak the truth with justice in love.

C **Hear our prayer for Strength.**

R Gracious God, dismantle the barriers, visible and invisible, that prevent us from welcoming our sisters and brothers who are in peril or in need.

C **Hear our prayer for Hospitality.**

R Gracious God, change our hearts and the hearts of our Christian communities, that we may be agents of your healing.

C **Hear our prayer for Conversion.**

R Gracious God, open our eyes to see the whole of creation as your gift, and our hands to share its fruit in solidarity.

C **Hear our prayer for Generosity.**

The Lord's Prayer

L One in Jesus Christ, let us pray together in the words he taught us.

C **Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.**

- L** The people of Malta welcomed Paul and his companions with unusual kindness. Let us greet each other and share the peace which is Christ's gift to us.

We are sent out together to proclaim the Good News

- L** We have come together as Christians,
and therefore as fellow disciples.
As we yearn for Christian unity,
let us commit ourselves anew
to work for this common goal. *(Pause for silent prayer)*

(Church leaders who are present may join in proclaiming the Prayer of Blessing.)

May God the Father, who called us from darkness into light,
make us true bearers of God's light.

Amen.

May God the Son, who redeemed us by his precious blood,
empower us to follow his example in serving others.

Amen.

May God the Holy Spirit, who is Lord and giver of life,
strengthen us to endure the shipwrecks of life and reach the shores of salvation.

Amen.

May the Almighty and Merciful God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bless and protect us
now and forever.

- C** **Amen.**

- C** **We will set out together, to proclaim the wonders of God's love.
Amen! Alleluia! Amen!**

Concluding hymn

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 1

Reconciliation: Throwing the cargo overboard

Acts 27: 18-19, 21

“We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship’s tackle overboard... Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss.”

Psalm 85

Luke 18: 9-14

Reflection

As Christians from different Churches and Traditions, we have unfortunately, over the centuries, accumulated plenty of baggage consisting of mutual distrust, bitterness and suspicion. We thank the Lord for the birth and the growth of the ecumenical movement over the past century. Our encounter with Christians from other traditions and our common prayer for Christian Unity encourage us to seek mutual forgiveness, reconciliation and acceptance. We must not allow the baggage of our past to hinder us from drawing closer to one another. It is the Lord’s will that we let go, in order to let God!

Prayer

Forgiving God,
set us free from the painful memories of the past,
that wound our shared Christian life.
Lead us to reconciliation
so that, through the Holy Spirit we may overcome
hatred with love,
anger with gentleness,
and suspicion with trust.
We ask this in the name of your beloved Son, our brother Jesus. Amen.

DAY 2

Enlightenment: Seeking and showing forth Christ's light

Acts 27:20

“When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.”

Psalm 119:105-110

Mark 4:35-41

Reflection

Christ is our light and our guide. Without the light and guidance of Christ, we become disorientated. When Christians lose sight of Christ, they grow fearful and divided from one another. Moreover many people of good will outside the Church are unable to see the light of Christ because in our Christian division we reflect Christ's light less clearly or, at times, block it out completely. As we seek the light of Christ, we are drawn closer to one another, and so mirror this light more clearly, becoming truly a sign of Christ, the light of the world.

Prayer

God, your word is a light to our steps

and without you we are lost and disorientated.

Enlighten us so that, through your word, we may walk your path.

May our churches crave your guiding, consoling and transforming presence.

Give us the honesty we need to recognize when we make it difficult for others to see your light, and the grace we need to share your light with others.

We ask this in the name of your Son,

who calls us, his followers, to be light to the world. Amen.

DAY 3

Hope: Paul's message

Acts 27.22, 34

“I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship ... none of you will lose a hair from your heads ...”

Psalm 27

Mathew 11:28-30

Reflection

As Christians belonging to churches and traditions that are not fully reconciled to one another, we are often discouraged by the lack of progress towards visible unity. Indeed, some have given up all hope and see this unity as an unattainable ideal. Others don't even see unity as a necessary part of their Christian faith. As we pray for this gift of visible unity, let us do so with steadfast faith, enduring patience and expectant hope, trusting in God's loving providence. Unity is the Lord's prayer for the Church and he is accompanying us on this journey. We will not be lost.

Prayer

God of mercy,
lost and disheartened, we turn to you.
Instil in us your gift of hope.
May our churches hope and strive for the unity
for which your Son prayed on the eve of his passion.
We ask this through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.
Amen.

DAY 4

Trust: Do not be afraid, believe

Acts 27:23-26

“For the last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.”

Psalm 56

Luke 12.22-34

Reflection

In the midst of the tempest Paul’s encouragement and hope contradicted the fear and despair of his fellow travellers. Our common call to be disciples of Jesus Christ entails being a sign of contradiction. In a world riven with anxieties, we are called to stand as witnesses to hope by placing our trust in God’s loving providence. Christian experience shows us that God writes straight on crooked lines, and we know, against all odds, we will not drown or be lost. Because God’s steadfast love endures for ever.

Prayer

Almighty God,
our personal suffering leads us to cry out in pain
and we shrink in fear when we experience sickness, anxiety
or the death of loved ones.
Teach us to trust you.
May the churches we belong to be signs of your providential care.
Make us true disciples of your Son
who taught us to listen to your word
and to serve one another.
In confidence we ask this in the name of your Son,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 5

Strength: Breaking bread for the journey

Acts 27:33-36

“Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.’ After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves.”

Psalm 77

Mark 6:30-44

Reflection

Paul’s invitation to eat is an exhortation to those in the boat to strengthen themselves for what lies ahead. This taking of bread marks a change of attitude, as those in the boat move from despair to courage. In a similar way the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper provides us with food for the journey and re-orientates us to life in God. We are made strong. The breaking of the bread – at the core of Christian community life and worship – builds us up as we commit ourselves to Christian service. We long for the day when all Christians will be able to share at the same table of the Lord’s Supper and draw strength from one bread and one cup.

Prayer

Loving God,
your Son Jesus Christ broke bread
and shared the cup with his friends on the eve of his passion.
May we grow together in closer communion.
Following the example of Paul and the early Christians,
give us strength to build bridges of compassion, solidarity and harmony.
In the power of the Holy Spirit,
we ask this in the name of your Son,
who gives his life that we might live. Amen.

DAY 6

Hospitality: Show unusual kindness

Acts 28:1-2, 7

“After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us round it ... Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days”

Psalm 46

Luke 14:12-24

Reflection

After the traumas and conflicts of the storm at sea, the practical care offered by the islanders is experienced as an unusual kindness by those washed up on the shores. Such kindness demonstrates our common humanity. The Gospel teaches us that when we care for those in distress we are showing love to Christ himself (cf. Matthew 25: 40). Furthermore, when we show loving kindness to the weak and dispossessed we are attuning our hearts to the heart of God in which the poor have a special place. Welcoming outsiders, whether they be people of other cultures or beliefs, immigrants or refugees, is both to love Christ himself, and to love as God loves. As Christians, we are called to step out in faith and reach out with God’s all-embracing love, even to those we find difficult to love.

Prayer

God of the orphan, the widow and the stranger,
instil in our hearts a deep sense of hospitality.
Open our eyes and hearts
when you ask us to feed you, to clothe you and to visit you.
May our churches participate
in the ending of hunger, thirst and isolation
and in overcoming barriers that prevent the welcome of all people.
We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus,
who is present in the least of our sisters and brothers. Amen.

DAY 7

Conversion: Changing our hearts and minds

Acts 28:3-6

“Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, ‘This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.’ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.”

Psalms 119: 137-144

Matthew 18: 1-6

Reflection

The locals realized that their judgment of Paul as a murderer was wrong, so they changed their minds. The extraordinary event with the viper enables the islanders to see things in a new way, a way which might prepare them to hear the message of Christ through Paul. In our search for Christian unity and reconciliation we are often challenged to rethink how we perceive other traditions and cultures. This demands an ongoing conversion to Christ in which the churches learn to overcome their perception of the other as a threat. As a result, our pejorative views of others will be cast away, and we will be drawn closer to unity.

Prayer

Almighty God,
we turn to you with repentant hearts.
In our sincere quest for your truth,
purify us from our unjust opinions of others
and lead the churches to grow in communion.
Help us let go of our fears,
and so better understand each other and the stranger in our midst.
We ask this in the name of the Just One,
your beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

DAY 8

Generosity: Receiving and giving

Acts 28: 8-10

“The father of Publius lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him. After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They bestowed many honours on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed”.

Psalms 103: 1-5

Matthew 10: 7-8

Reflection

This story is full of giving and receiving: Paul received unusual kindness from the islanders; Paul gives healing to the father of Publius and others; having lost everything in the storm, the 276 receive abundant provisions as they set sail. As Christians we are called to unusual kindness. But in order to give we must first learn to receive – from Christ and from others. More often than we realize, we are recipients of acts of kindness from people who are different from us. These acts also point towards the generosity and healing of our Lord. We who have been healed by the Lord are responsible for passing on that which we have received.

Prayer

God, giver of life,
we thank you for the gift of your compassionate love
which soothes and strengthens us.
We pray that our churches
may be always open to receive your gifts from one another.
Grant us a spirit of generosity to all
as we journey together in the path of Christian unity.
We ask this in the name of your Son
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
Amen.

THE ECUMENICAL SITUATION IN MALTA

Malta, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, received the Christian faith through the efforts of the Apostle, Paul, after he was shipwrecked there while travelling to Rome. In Acts 27 and 28, we read the detailed narrative describing the terrible storm at sea, the 'providential' shipwreck and the subsequent welcome afforded to the 276 individuals on the vessel who all made it safely to shore. Paul's healing ministry in Malta is also briefly described in the same New Testament text.

During its long and chequered history, Malta was ruled by various powers: the Carthaginians, the Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabians, the Aragonese, the Knights of the Order of St John, the French and the British. Malta became an independent nation within the British Commonwealth in 1964. In 2004, it joined the European Union.

The Christian faith is deeply rooted in the culture of the inhabitants of Malta and its sister island of Gozo. Although the current population of about 430,000 is predominantly Roman Catholic, there are significant groups of Christians belonging to other traditions. Ecumenism is not a new experience to the local population. Being at the crossroads of civilizations, religions, trade and migration, has made the people of Malta always open to others, and markedly hospitable. The Maltese people recognize that the proper handling of current differences can lead to the mutual appreciation of the respective richness found in the different Churches.

The first permanent and numerically significant presence of members from other Churches dates back to the first half of the 19th century. The strong military and naval presence of British servicemen and their accompanying pastors eventually led to the construction of suitable and dignified places of worship for the members of the Church of Scotland (St Andrew's Scots' Church, founded in 1824, completed in 1857), the Anglican Communion (St Paul's Pro-Cathedral founded in 1839, completed in 1844) and the Methodist Church (completed in 1883). The Crimean War and the opening of the Suez Canal made Malta a strategic naval base as well as the hub of trade and an important shipyard.

A Greek Orthodox community was established in 1816 by Greeks and Cypriots living in Malta. From the 1990s, there was an exponential growth of members of different Orthodox Churches. The majority consist of Eastern Europeans settling in Malta in order to find work. This includes Serbian and Russian Orthodox, as well as Romanian and Bulgarian Orthodox. At the same time, a substantial quantity of Oriental Orthodox faithful, especially from Egypt, Ethiopia and Eritrea, have found refuge in Malta, after fleeing their respective countries on account of persecution. The same can be said about small groups of Orthodox Christians from the Middle East, particularly from Syria and Iraq.

This wide kaleidoscope of Christian Churches makes the ecumenical scene a vibrant one indeed. The first ecumenical encounters in Malta took place in the mid-1960s when a small group of Roman Catholic clergyman regularly met a number of chaplains from the British forces stationed in Malta. They discussed matters of common interest and prayed together. Collaboration between Maltese biblical scholars and clergy from different Christian traditions was also frequent and fruitful. It is known that many of these ecumenical contacts were based

on deeply rooted friendly relationships. The Malta Bible Society worked with the clergy from a number of different Christian communities.

The first formal ecumenical services in Malta were held in the late 1960s and the early 70s. Furthermore, the first meetings of ARCIC and of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue were held in Malta. In October 1977, the Catholic Archbishop of Malta, Mgr Joseph Mercieca, instituted a Diocesan Ecumenical Commission. Its task was to encourage prayer for Christian unity, and to promote Catholic awareness and understanding of the presence of other Christian communities.

In 1995, Maurice Eminyán SJ founded the Malta Ecumenical Council, today referred to as Christians Together in Malta. The Council includes representatives of the various Churches. They meet every two months, to discuss ecumenical matters, to organize public dialogue meetings and, in collaboration with the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission, to finalize the content and the logistical arrangements of ecumenical services. The main ecumenical service is held in January, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Another service is held in the days preceding or following the feast of Pentecost.

The members of Christians Together in Malta are the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Seventh Day Adventists are also part of the Council.

In Malta, ecumenical relations thrive. The working relationship is marked by deep respect and authentic collaboration. The Roman Catholic Church in Malta has been instrumental in assisting the various Orthodox Churches in finding a suitable venue for worship. Similarly the Roman Catholic diocese of Gozo has opened its doors to provide worship venues for Anglicans and other Christians from the Reformed traditions.

Besides the customary Ecumenical Services, other regular ecumenical gestures of note, in Malta, include the following:

- 1) A common project of *diaconia*, either locally or abroad, which receives financial support from across the Christian communities;
- 2) The Christmas Festival of Nine Lessons, at St Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral, Valletta, involving the participation of ecumenical partners;
- 3) An Ecumenical reception hosted by the Catholic Archbishop of Malta, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity;
- 4) Common initiatives, such as visiting the sick and the elderly, carol singing, and events on the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for Creation;
- 5) The mutual participation of Christian leaders in Malta at special patronal feasts;
- 6) Collaboration with St Andrew's, Church of Scotland, in supporting a Food Bank;
- 7) The Lighthouse Network which brings Christians together on a monthly basis for prayer and praise;
- 8) Ministers from different Christian traditions collaborate in teaching a Higher Education award in Ecumenism organized by the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission in collaboration with the Pastoral Formation Institute of the Archdiocese of Malta;
- 9) The President of the Republic of Malta annually invites Church leaders to a round table discussion and a Christmas meal, some days prior to Christmas.

Ecumenical collaboration at various levels has been instrumental in promoting the cause of Christian Unity in Malta. The ecumenical climate in Malta is indeed a positive one and may truly serve as a microcosm of ecumenical dialogue on a universal level.