

THE HARDSHIPS OF PAUL

This Sunday we celebrate the Feast of St Peter and Paul – a couple of weeks ago, the weekday reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians contained a list of some of the things Paul endured, as he walked and sailed around the Eastern Mediterranean within 20 years of Jesus' death, while trying to convert people to Jesus, and found small communities/churches. The background to this particular passage is some Christians – probably conservative Jews from Jerusalem – visiting Corinth and undermining the gospel message Paul had preached there. Paul's story – and life – are amazing, as the commentary below reveals, while also offering us a remarkably vivid picture of the dangers of travel nearly 2000 years ago....

The Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians Chapter 11: verses 18, 21b-29

Brothers and sisters:

Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of-

I am speaking as a fool - I also dare to boast of that.

Are they Hebrews? So am I.

Are they Israelites? So am I.

Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one -

.....I am talking like a madman -

with far greater labours, far more imprisonments,

with countless beatings, and often near death.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews

the forty lashes less one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.

Three times I was shipwrecked;

for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers,

danger from robbers, danger from my own people,

danger from Gentiles, danger in the city,

danger in the wilderness, danger at sea,

danger from false brothers;

in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night,

in hunger and thirst, often without food,

in cold and exposure.

And, apart from other things,

there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

The American biblical scholar, Ray Collins, wrote a fascinating explanation/commentary on this passage, entitled 'Paul's Hardships', revealing the kind of life Paul lived 'on the road'.

11:24-29. Paul follows up his introduction with a detailed list of his apostolic sufferings. This is the third such listing of Paul's hardships in this letter (see 4:8-12; 6:4-10). A fourth will follow in the next chapter (12:10). This list is the longest of the four and contains some vocabulary that does not appear elsewhere in Paul's correspondence as well as other words that he rarely uses. Like the other catalogues, this list demonstrates Paul's endurance and his steadfastness in preaching the gospel, despite the difficulties that he encountered at virtually every turn.

The list begins with a series of hardships in which Paul's very life was at risk, illustrating thereby the many dangers of death that he mentions in his summary introduction: **Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;** (11:24-25). His own people were the first source of danger. The Acts of the Apostles frequently mentions Paul's attempts to preach the gospel in the synagogue, the result being that Jews turned against him (Acts 9:20-23; 13:44-45, 50; 14:1-2; 17:1-5, 10-13; 18:4-6; cf. 22:19; 26:11). Luke, the author of 'Acts', does not mention that the apostle received the forty-lashes-but-one five times,

but it was a classic Jewish punishment. The maximum legal punishment meted out to the loser in a civil case was forty lashes, but the law contained a stern warning against anything beyond that number (Deut. 25:1-3). Hence, it was customary to flog the offender only thirty-nine times. That Paul received the maximum penalty five times shows the widespread offence that his own people took at his preaching and his own determination to preach the gospel first to his fellow Jews.

Paul was also punished by Roman authorities. Three times he was beaten with rods. According to both the *Lex Portia* and the *Lex Julia*, this kind of punishment was not to be inflicted on Roman citizens (cf. Acts 16:37-39), but there were exceptions. Luke recounts that magistrates at Philippi ordered that Paul and Silas be flogged in this fashion, "with rods" (Acts 16:22-23).

Paul also had rocks thrown at him, perhaps by an angry mob that tried to stone him (Acts 14:19). That Paul was shipwrecked three times is not surprising considering the number of sea voyages that he undertook. One of the shipwrecks left Paul adrift in the sea for almost a full twenty-four hours. Luke mentions Paul suffering shipwreck off the island of Malta (Acts 27:39-44), but that shipwreck occurred long after the writing of this letter.

With his **frequent journeys** (11:26), Paul was constantly in danger. Eight times he mentions the dangers that he faced; the phrase *en kindynois* ("in dangers") is repeated eight times. Travelling with only a few companions, as he forded streams and travelled on roads in isolated areas, the apostle faced dangers **from rivers and danger from robbers**. Just as he suffered punishment from Jewish and Gentile authorities, he encountered **dangers from my own people and danger from Gentiles**. Neither his ethnicity nor his Roman citizenship protected him as he travelled about to preach the gospel. No matter where he was, there was the possibility of danger. Neither urban areas, deserted areas, nor the sea afforded him safe passage. There were **danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, and danger at sea**. The climax of this list of dangers is danger of another sort. There were **danger from false brothers** (*en pseuda-delphois*, cf. Gal. 2:4). For the apostle, the most serious danger of all came from fellow believers who tried to undermine his apostolic work. The intrusive false apostles at Corinth are certainly among them.

Other hardships that Paul endured were self-imposed, at least to some degree. He did not hesitate to push himself to the limit in order to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. **In toil and hardship** (11:27) he preached the gospel. The combination also appears in 1 Thess. 2:9 (cf. 2 Thess. 3:8) in reference to Paul's working night and day to support himself as he preached the gospel. Its appearance here is particularly relevant insofar as the interlopers apparently criticized Paul for his refusal to receive financial support from the Corinthians. The combination suggests that the "far more labour" in his summary introduction relates to the exercise of his trade (cf. 1 Cor. 4:12).

That Paul often lived with **many a sleepless night** (see 6:5) and **in hunger and thirst** (cf. 1 Cor. 4:11, linking hunger and thirst) were probably consequences of his decision to be self-supporting. Manual labourers and artisans often did not make enough to feed themselves properly. Paul was **often without food, in cold and exposure**. Paul's being without food could be a reference to a religious fast, but in the context of a catalogue of hardships, the expression more likely refers to the fact that Paul was hungry because he was poor (6:5). In 1 Cor. 4:11 Paul complains about being clad in rags (*gymniteuomen*). Now he says that he was poorly clothed (*en gymnotēti*; cf. Rom. 8:35), a sure sign of his poverty. The verb and the noun denote nakedness, but those who were poorly clothed and in rags were said to be naked.

Before beginning the fool's speech, Paul tells the Corinthians that despite being in poverty (11:9), he has refused to take any money from them. In the last several phrases of this long catalogue of hardships, Paul spells out some of the consequences of his poverty.

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (11:28). There is no need for Paul to go on. He has written enough: the point has been made. As a minister of Christ, he has suffered hardship for the sake of the gospel. But there is one more thing that he wants to mention, his worrisome concern for the communities that he has evangelized. Every day he experiences pressure (*epistasis*). He is torn apart (*merimna*) by his concern for the churches. **All the churches**, the several communities that Paul has evangelized, are a constant source of worry for him (see Gal. 4:19-20; 1 Thess. 3:1-5). The interlopers apparently boasted about many things, but it is hardly likely that they were able to boast about a concern for the churches. Paul's reference to the churches provides a context for all his hardships. What he has endured is for the sake of the communities that he evangelized.....