

Seeing Saint Paul

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On May 22 we read Chapter 28 in Acts. It's the book's final chapter, and it offers us several glimpses into the life and character of Saint Paul.

The chapter first describes a winter sea voyage, a fierce storm and shipwreck on the island of Malta. Fortunately, the island's inhabitants welcome their wet, cold visitors with a fire. Paul shows himself to be one who serves rather than waiting to be served; he helps the others gather sticks and heaps them on the blaze. The heat draws a viper out of Paul's bundle of sticks, and it attaches itself to his hand. When he shakes it off and is unharmed, the natives see that he can't be overcome either by shipwreck or a possibly poisonous snake. They decide he is a god.

But Paul simply continues to serve. He heals the father of the island's "chief man" and after that others who are sick. The grateful islanders load him and his companions with provisions and gifts when they finally set sail again.

The voyage ends at Puteoli, and Paul continues by land to Rome. But his entrance into the capital city isn't what he must have envisioned, for he comes as a prisoner. Yet just as he favorably impressed the Maltese, he impresses those guarding him. Rather than being put in the common military prison, he is "allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier that guarded him" (16).

Paul does in Rome what he has faithfully done in every city, calling the local Jewish community together. He assures them that he respects their faith, "since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain" (20). Then, with his usual unflagging energy, he speaks with them "from morning till evening, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets" (23).

Some are convinced by Paul's words; others are not and they argue among themselves. Paul then quotes the words of Isaiah to explain why the Gospel will be preached to the Gentiles rather than the Jews who refuse to believe. Jesus has quoted these same words to His disciples in Matthew's Gospel, adding, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (13:14-16).

The final verses show us that Paul, as always, attracts many and diverse people. He welcomes all who come, preaching to those who don't yet believe, and teaching believers who want to learn more.

The Book of Acts does not describe the end of Paul's life. Tradition tells us that he was released and then made or directed further missionary journeys. Later he was rearrested, condemned, and executed under Nero.

Saint John Chrysostom wasn't worried by the lack of a certain conclusion in Acts. He wrote that Luke "leaves the reader thirsting so that thereafter he guesses for himself...For to know everything makes one sluggish and dull."

Troparion - Tone 4

First-enthroned of the apostles,
teachers of the universe:
Entreat the Master of all
to grant peace to the world,
and to our souls great mercy!