Guiding communities facing despair

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- from *The Shipwreck of St Paul* by Nicolo Circignani

... striving ever to promote God's glory, [and] *the world's peace ...*

- from the daily prayer of the Order of Malta

A New Testament perspective on Christian civic ministry

By appreciating the value of civic ministry as detailed in the New Testament, Christians may learn to influence secular government and society, especially as communities face despair. We may particularly learn from the Apostle Paul who gained the trust of the centurion Julius prior to warning and guiding him, and providing civic leadership during their voyage to Rome (Acts 27-28).

Nevertheless, many people regard civic ministry as futile, since communities will be put right only when Christ returns as Prince of Peace in the end times. Certainly the kingdom of God shall be asserted fully at the coming of Jesus, whose rule is currently unrecognised by many, as it involves no imposition. Thus *at present we do not see everything subject to him ...* (Hebrews 2:8), and we await a time when *every knee will bow* (Romans 14:11). But in this present age the civic authority must govern as *God's servant to do you good* (Romans 13:4), and we do right to assist that work, as did the Apostle Paul.

Civic ministry exercised by the Apostle to the Gentiles

The New Testament provides a very detailed example of civic ministry by the Apostle Paul, who helped a community in tremendous despair as it apparently faced its own end of times. In that episode, as Paul sailed from Caesarea to Rome via Malta (Acts 27-28) he ministered personally to a Roman authority and gave a caution against foolish civic governance. After his warning was ignored, peril came on the community which soon gave up all hope. Paul then shared a message of grace, and he gave practical help and leadership while speaking publicly about God's goodness. Effectively taking charge of the ship, Paul issued instructions which the Roman authorities heeded. That ministry example may be seen as integral to the commission given to Paul by Christ - *"... to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings"* (Acts 9:15).

Paul guiding the community

In the Book of Acts, it is written that *Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment* (Acts 27:1). Thus we know the soldier's name, rank and regiment. Moreover, Paul ministered personally to that centurion, and earned his trust: The narrative informs us that when Paul and the others on board reached Sidon, *Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs* (27:3). Astonishingly, this high profile prisoner who is being escorted to stand trial before the emperor, is given shore leave by the centurion! Since it would be his life for Paul's if the apostle had absconded, we may deduce that Paul's personal ministry to Julius prompted enormous trust.

Having gained the centurion's confidence, Paul warned him and the others on board: *Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous ..."* (27:9).

After the civic authority ignored Paul's wise counsel, they set sail and soon encountered ferocious weather: *We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved* (27:19-20). The community was anxious as it faced death and possibly thought the cosmos was collapsing at the end of times - as the sun and stars no longer functioned.

Yet Paul continued to minister practically and spiritually. So rebuking the civic leaders, he encouraged everyone: *After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost* (27:21-22).

Paul then spoke of his own faith, and ambition to testify before the emperor: *Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me ... "* (27:23-25).

The apostle leading the secular community

Paul effectively took charge of the vessel as the authorities heeded his word: *In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away* (27:30-32). Thus the Apostle Paul gave wise leadership though he held no public office, in accord with Ecclesiastes 7:19 - *Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city.*

Paul's practical and spiritual ministry continued when encouraging everyone to take food, and as he gave thanks publicly to God: *Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food - you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves* (27:33-37). His approach may challenge Christians today, who often provide practical ministry (whether feeding the hungry, shaping the culture, or engaging with civic leaders) without giving recognition to God. Paul's approach was in accord with that of our Lord, who rebuked those who came to him only for bread and would not appreciate its spiritual significance (John 6:26).

When the ship ran aground, the centurion intervened to prevent his execution. Consequently, all the other prisoners were spared from death for Paul's sake: *The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan* (Acts 27:42-43).

Paul continued to provide practical help as he served humbly to gather wood for a fire - after the community landed on the island of Malta - and there he ministered to the father of the local civic authority, whose name, position and action is recorded approvingly: *There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured* (28:1-3).

Civic ministry in principle and practice

The Apostle Paul's rigorous words of wise counsel, and his many good works (during the voyage and on the island of Malta), give a practical outworking to the principles of civic ministry which he urged Titus (3:1) to emphasise:

> *... Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.*

Applying those principles, Paul practised what he preached, as we see in Acts:

- Paul was so graciously *subject* to Julius as to obtain his kindness (27:3);
- Gladly *obedient* to the authority, Paul returned after shore leave (27:4);
- He was *ready to do whatever is good*, when help was needed (27:22);
- Making a most emphatic warning (27:10), he spoke *to slander no one*;
- Urging the people to eat (27:33), he was *peaceable and considerate*;
- With *true humility*, Paul took the lowly task of gathering wood (28:3).

The instruction *remind the people* (Titus 3:1) indicates that the churches had received Paul's teaching on civic ministry, but required renewed input, and the same is true today. However, the aim to *be subject to rulers and authorities* does not require our slavish or unthinking action, but relates to us helping the worthy endeavour of civic authorities which promotes the common good.

The legacy of Paul's civic involvement

Paul's ministry on the ship enabled his input to the island of Malta which soon developed a keen Christian heritage that has enriched the world. According to tradition, Publius received the faith through Paul's ministry, and became the first bishop of Malta, and the island became the first Christian nation in the West. During the Middle Ages the nation was led by the Knights of Malta and became renowned internationally for medical excellence under their influence.

Their symbol ✠ (the Maltese Cross) became featured in many civic and other contexts including on St John Ambulances and on the Crown of King Edward the Confessor. That crown was chosen by Queen Elizabeth II to be her symbol and therefore appeared on the badges of militia, parliamentarians, police and other authorities which serve the Crown, to indicate the supremacy of Christ.

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