

An Accidental Crusoe

By Adam Kelly

As a child you probably learned the story of Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist in the novel commonly known by that name, written at the beginning of the 18th century by author Daniel Defoe. The full title of the book hardly trips off the tongue, “The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: Who Lived Eight and Twenty Years, All Alone in an Uninhabited Island on the Coast of America, Near the Mouth of the Great River Oroonoke; Have Been Cast on Shore by Shipwreck, Wherein all the Men Perished but Himself, With an Account how he was at Last Strangely Delivered by Pirates”; but it is at least instructive of the central theme of the story: that Crusoe found himself “all alone in an uninhabited island”.

In these present times, living with the restrictions imposed to try and repel the threat of Covid, many of us will have felt *alone*, cut off from most of life’s social interactions that we had taken so much for granted; and our homes, which once played host to visiting friends and family coming from near and far, have become their own *uninhabited islands*. What then might we learn from the story of Crusoe, as he grappled with circumstances recognisable to us?

Whilst he was without any human company, we learn early on that Crusoe made it ashore with a dog and two cats. He formed a bond with his animals which helped sustain him in his earliest days of isolation. That will come as no surprise to today’s pet owners, with one recent survey suggesting 86% of them had bonded more with their animals since lockdown began and 43% said their animal had helped reduce their anxiety. The companionship of animals, it seems, has never been more popular - with the RSPCA recently reporting a 600% increase in visits to its puppy fostering website - it seems unlikely this is a coincidence.

Beyond his animals, Crusoe’s days were filled with the practical need to establish a habitat in which he could survive, providing for himself shelter and sustenance, but his nights were long and lonely. Nine months after his arrival on the island he becomes sick and takes to his bed, whereupon he has a dream in which he is visited by an angel. The message of the angel is terrifying for Crusoe; he is forced to confront his past sins, particularly his fractious relationship with his father. Upon waking he is shaken, and remarks that he has thus far lived without “the least sense, either of the fear of God in danger, or of thankfulness to God in deliverances”.

Now Crusoe had not only rescued his animals from the shipwreck, but had also brought ashore a Bible. Moved by his dream, he opened it, and leaping off the page were the words of the 15th verse of the 50th Psalm, “And call upon me in the day of trouble: so will I deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me”. Whether it was good fortune or providence which took him to these specific words we do not know (or whether they are one in the same thing) - Crusoe certainly believes it was the latter. So moved was he that he took to prayer, and “prayed to God to fulfil the promise to [him]”.

In this there is surely a lesson for Christians: that despite the human isolation of the current situation, we are not alone. Just as Crusoe did, through prayer we can activate and reactivate our relationship with God as often as we need to. He knows and understands we are suffering and He will hear us.

After this first experience Crusoe set about reading the New Testament, learning for himself about the example of Jesus and the teachings of the early Christians. From this he concludes that “whenever [you] come to a true sense of things [you] will find deliverance from sin a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction”.

Upon first reading one would be forgiven for thinking this is somewhat dismissive of human suffering, but by this time Crusoe has formed a deep Christian conviction that "...hope [is] founded on the encouragement of the Word of God". Hope, a small word of just one syllable, but a powerful word nonetheless. Hope can vanquish fear; hope can gird us for challenges which lie ahead; hope can instil in us the fortitude to withstand suffering. But have we any hope?

Hope in the secular world comes and goes like the seasons, it is a feeling, an emotion; but for Christians, there is another hope. Through faith, hope is a sure and certain thing, that by the example of Jesus Christ we will have eternal life. Crusoe's faith gave him hope; surely ours can help sustain us through present troubles.

Even so, faith is often tested, and many of us will at times wander far from God and lose our way; our belief that God hears our prayers can be diminished by answers we cannot see or do not understand. So it was for Crusoe, who never stopped missing human company through all his time on the island, yet it was his first sighting of other people, a visiting tribe of "savages", which sends him in to panic. His fear was misplaced for he would go on to form a strong personal bond with an escaped prisoner of the tribe, whom he named Friday.

This experience taught Crusoe an important lesson, that even though his faith was strong, prayers are often answered in unexpected ways. And so it was, after twenty-eight years, Crusoe was finally rescued from the island. An English captain whose ship was beset by mutineers came ashore. For helping him deal with the pirates, the captain offered Crusoe safe passage back to England: his deliverance had finally come. Through faith and prayer and hope, ours too will come - and until that day, like for Crusoe, there's always the animals.

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