

Sailing ships on the Mediterranean Sea in the Middle Ages had no radios. No binoculars. And no GPS devices. So, what was a navigator to do? Well, they could use a portolan chart.

Hand-drawn and often quite colorful, these charts were written on vellum, an animal skin that had been prepared by cleaning, bleaching and stretching it. The charts contained information that was lifesaving for sailors, who used them to find their way to the safety of a port. Although they contained very little information about inland geography, the charts provided crucial data about coastlines and harbors.

Sailors called them “portolans,” from the Italian word *portolano*, meaning “harbor official” or “navigation manual.” Portolans were used for more than 500 years, showing seafarers where to dock and how to avoid danger. According to *Yale Alumni Magazine*, they were “renowned for their accuracy — which is remarkable, as early cartographers couldn’t see the coast from a distance.”

Portolans also show major ports in red letters and minor ports in black. Shoals and other sailing hazards are identified with dots.

And here is a fact that will surprise you if you are accustomed to holding a map with the north side up and the south side facing down: Because “portolans were designed to be rotated to suit viewers at a communal table, they were not

drawn with a distinct top or bottom.” A portolan could be understood from any side or any angle.

Speaking of maps, have you heard the one about the couple on a road trip. The wife was driving, and the husband was trying to read a large map and give her directions. He became very frustrated with the fine print on the map, so he crumpled it up and threw it in the back seat. She turned to him and said, “You’re not going to get anywhere with that latitude.”

The third chapter of the gospel of John contains what is probably the most famous verse in Scripture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” In fact, in today’s Gospel story Jesus God’s only Son, the eternal Word of God in human form, invites us to believe in him, so that we will not perish. And he shows us the way to live, so that we can enjoy the safety and security of eternal life with God. In other words, Jesus is God’s portolan.

So, how does it work exactly? God put his Word *in human skin*, long before navigational charts were put on animal skin. “In the beginning was the Word,” says John in the first chapter of his gospel. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Yes, it was in Jesus that the Word of God became flesh, visible in human skin. It was the appearance of God in Jesus that allowed us to experience

the grace and truth of God in a way that we could never imagine before. Ancient scrolls did not do the trick. We needed to see God's Word in flesh and blood.

A few chapters later, Jesus is talking with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. During their conversation, Jesus tells him that God had a history of providing portolan charts to save his people. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," says Jesus, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Back in the book of Numbers, the people of Israel faced trouble in the wilderness. They were not in danger of crashing into rocks along a coastline but facing death from the bites of poisonous serpents. God offered Moses a portolan by saying, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So, Moses made a serpent out of bronze and put it upon a pole.

Can you guess the result? Whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. And like the serpent on the pole, Jesus is God's portolan. He is as visible as the serpent of Moses, the one we look up to when we are in danger of perishing, when we are as scared as medieval sailors on a dark and stormy sea. And his promise is as true today as it ever has been: "everyone who believes in me may not perish but may have eternal life."

In my Enews article this week I mentioned that, interestingly enough, the solution in the book of Numbers was a snake raised up on a pole, because the problem was poisonous serpents on the ground. In John's Gospel Jesus offers up God's plan for humanity's sinfulness. Similarly, he is the cure!

As a human (the Word made flesh) Christ declares that he will be lifted up on a pole, which meant that the problem must have been with us humans on the ground. Our predicament is our sinful human nature, therefore a human-being had to be lifted up on a pole. Thankfully, Jesus is no mere mortal, and his divinity makes the effect last for eternity! So, just as the ancient Israelites looked to the serpent on the pole and were cured from their poisonous bites, in faith we can look to the cross of Jesus and live!

Belief is so important in John 3:16. Navigators in the Middle Ages had to believe in their portolans to avoid dying at sea. In this morning's Gospel we are invited to believe in Jesus to avoid perishing on this journey we call life. Fortunately, we can trust Christ to rescue us and guide us. He is the clearest possible sign that God loves us and wants to save us.

The two meanings of the Italian word *portolano* are significant: "Harbor official" and "navigation manual." In fact, you might say that Jesus plays both roles as he guides us toward eternal life. He is not only the Word of God in human

skin, but he is the one who leads us away from danger and toward a safe harbor with God.

First, let us think on **Jesus as our harbor official**. He is the one sent by God to welcome us home, to lead us safely into port. “Indeed,” says the gospel of John, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. In other words, those who believe in him are not condemned.”

Think about how important it is to trust the harbor official. If we follow his guidance, we are going to dock safely. If we distrust him and argue with him, we are going to end up on the rocks. The story is told of two radio operators, one of them aboard a U.S. Navy ship. They had the following exchange:

Radio 1, on the Navy ship: “Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.”

Radio 2: “Recommend you divert *your* course 15 degrees.”

Radio 1: “This is a U.S. Navy ship. I repeat, divert your course.”

Radio 2: “Negative, divert *your* course.”

Radio 1: “This is an aircraft carrier of the United States Navy. Divert your course immediately!”

Radio 2: “This is a lighthouse. Your call.”

All the guidance Jesus gives us in Scripture is designed to keep us from crashing. By believing in him, we will not perish but will have eternal life. To paraphrase the woman in the car trip joke, we're not going to get anywhere without the right latitude. Thankfully, our Lord and savior is able to help us with this!

Secondly, **Jesus can also be seen as our navigation manual.** He is the one who shows us how to walk in the light of God's truth and God's grace. "And this is the judgment," says the gospel of John, "that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ... But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

In John's gospel, there is a lot of talk of light and darkness, with light always referring to good and darkness always referring to evil. This is an unfortunate pairing, since we all know that darkness is not always bad! Babies grow in the darkness of the womb, and seeds sprout in the darkness of the earth. And unfortunately, language about light and dark can spill over into our assessments of skin tones, adding fuel to the fire of racism.

That being said, perhaps it would be better for us to talk simply about good and evil, and to say that Jesus has come to guide us in the path of truth and goodness and grace. He is a navigation manual for us; he helps us avoid the dangers of lies and evil actions and judgmental attitudes. When we follow Jesus,

we walk the path of the One who is “the way and the truth and the life.” When we imitate his actions, we show goodness and generosity to others. And when we receive his grace, we not only experience forgiveness for ourselves, but we become able to forgive those who have hurt us.

Jesus is the One we consult when we need to find our way. And to have such a figure on our portolan charts is really nothing new. Historians have found that the Red Sea was often depicted on portolans in the Middle Ages. This was not because Mediterranean sailors needed to find their way through the Red Sea. Instead, it was a reminder to them. It told them that God was with them, working for good in their lives, just as God had been with the Israelites as they crossed the Red Sea to escape their oppression in Egypt.

Jesus is God’s portolan, the Word of God in human skin. He is our harbor official, our navigation manual, and lighthouse. He can be approached from many sides, by people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. When you find yourself unable to see what lies ahead, put your faith in him. He will keep you from perishing and guide you safely to eternal life with God. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.