

Acts 16:16-34**John 17:20 – end****Introduction**

I wonder how you would feel if there was a very real danger of you being thrown into prison when you obeyed God and how that would affect the way you live as a Christian. This was a very real dilemma for the early Christians. Filled with the Holy Spirit they were empowered by him to perform amazing miracles and to speak fearlessly about Jesus and his death on the cross for our sins.

This caused great consternation amongst the Jewish leaders and it wasn't long before they arrested Peter and John and warned them not to preach the Gospel. The disciple's response was not to obey but to ask God to give them the power to continue preaching and performing miracles.

We see this very much in Paul's ministry. The Gospel message was offensive to the Jews in the cities of Asia Minor where he preached and they followed him from town to town causing trouble and stirring up the people to oppose what he was doing.

In our reading today we find Paul in Philippi. He and his companions had preached to the community of Jews who worshipped by the river and Lydia, a rich woman who worshipped God had heard the good news and come to faith in Jesus.

For Paul and the other disciples telling the Good news and bringing God's power into people's lives was simply what they did. For them that was what being a Christian meant. It wasn't just about worshipping God on Sundays and praying privately in between. For them serving Jesus meant that their faith touched every area of their lives and they were impelled to talk of him to everyone they met demonstrating God's love and power in the things they did.

Luke, who was one of Paul's co-workers, tells us how one day as they were on their way to a place of prayer they were met by a slave girl who had a spirit that predicted the future. This girl was a real asset to her owners and they made a good income by exploiting her condition. On this occasion the spirit that afflicted her recognized in Paul a servant of the living God in the same way that during Jesus's ministry spirits had recognized him and acknowledged his power over them. In the presence Of God's power – either in Jesus himself or through the indwelling Holy Spirit unclean spirits fear and tremble.

The spirit who infected this girl recognized who Paul was. She shouted, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." What a wonderful advertisement. I wonder though, how I would respond if someone shouted this wherever I went. "On the

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one hand it sets the stage for sharing the Gospel with people but on the other hand it is embarrassing and wearying.”

Paul certainly found it so and commanded the spirit to leave the girl and, we are told, ‘at that moment the Spirit left her’. What was good news for the girl, the release from an evil spirit, was very bad news for her owners. They had lost their source of income and were furious. They dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities and accused them. “These men are Jews and are throwing the city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

Look at the way the owners of the slave-girl exploit the power struggle between the Jewish community and the Roman state to serve their own ends. They twist the facts about Paul and Silas’ encounter with their valuable property; they hide their evil intentions, and flatter those in power. We live in an age rife with twisted and ‘alternative’ facts – in social media, in some parts of the press, and in political life here at home and on the global stage. Power struggles are often implicated in the distortions.

Paul was simply telling the truth. Proclaiming God’s love and forgiveness to the people around him and there are many who don’t like that happening. These people didn’t want their ‘possession’ this poor girl to be rescued from her oppression. They wanted to use her and when she became useless to them they were out for revenge. In our society we need to be aware that there are many people who aren’t interested in the truth or in freedom from oppression and injustice as God is. They are interested in their own concerns, in building up their own power bases and when the fearless proclamation of the Gospel interferes with that they react violently and deceitfully.

So Paul and Silas found themselves thrown into prison and severely flogged. This is a story of turbulence: in the disturbed slave-girl; in the local political balance; and in the geology of the area that caused the earthquake.

It is also one of sharp contrasts: between the slave owners, who take advantage of their slave’s lack of control over her capacities, and Paul and Silas, who take no advantage from the chaotic freedom bestowed by the earthquake; between the violence of the crowd, the magistrates and the earthquake, and the restraint of Paul and Silas. We see Paul and Silas, not plotting how to gain their release, not angry at the injustice and indignity they had suffered but simply trusting in God for the outcome. They sat in their cell, bruised, sore and probably cold – and they praised God. We are told that they were praying and singing hymns to God, and

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the other prisoners were listening to them – as well they might. Surely worship is a most unusual response to the brutal treatment they had received.

Have you ever lost something important? Something that had been entrusted to you by someone else? How did you feel? What did you say to the person who had given it to you?

Imagine how the jailer felt when he saw that following the earthquake the doors were open – if a jailer had prisoners escape he was usually punished by being put to death himself. He must have been feeling guilty, fearful – desperate about his likely fate. Indeed, we can see just how desperate he was by the way he pulls out his sword and thinks about killing himself, rather than facing the punishment he expected. What a relief, then, for him to hear Paul's voice and to discover he had not lost his prisoners after all.

This is the gospel in action – God has intervened in the world to take away guilt and fear of punishment. Our job – as Jesus' followers – is to do what Paul did, and let other people know that there is hope.

Our Job is to live the Gospel in all of our lives and to enable people to see God's power at work in our lives. As Jesus' disciples we are called to proclaim the Good News of salvation but also to let it be seen in the way we live.

This passage presents us with a serious challenge. How would we have responded in Paul's place. OK, so we haven't been called as missionaries but we have been called to follow Jesus and as such we are commissioned share God's love and salvation with the people we meet.

On Thursday we celebrated Jesus' ascension into heaven. In Matthew's account of the event we are told that before he ascended Jesus left his disciples with the following commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey

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The Gospel in action

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everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”