

One of the joys, for me, of being a minister is that week by week as I prepare for worship I find that in the preparation of a sermon God never fails to feed me and to speak to me before he gives me something to say to others.

This week has been no different. It has been, a busy and demanding week when I have had to deal with a huge range of situations and I came to the Bible weary and empty. Yet who could fail to be encouraged by Jesus' words in our Gospel reading and by the account of God working in an impossible situation in Acts.

As we say farewell to Mel and send her on into her ministry it is appropriate and encouraging that we should be reading Jesus' prayer for his us his followers, "those who will believe in me through the message of the apostles". And his message is an encouragement for us continuing our ministry in the four churches and for Mel as she moves to Bury.

Jesus' prayer for us is that all of us should be one, in the same way that Jesus and his father are one. He calls us to a unity and commitment of the highest order – and why? So that the world may believe that Jesus has come from God to bring salvation. As Christians we are called to unity.

But at the heart of both our passages is mission. Our unity is to be a sign to the world that we have been called and sent by God. And our reading, from the acts of the apostles, goes on to show us what that calling and sending involves – and more than that the fact that we can trust God to direct us and provide for us when we are obeying him and trying to share our faith with others.

One of the things that happens time and again when we are really trying to live according to our Christian faith is that we are brought into conflict with the world around us in its corruption and selfish priorities. Paul healed a girl who he believed was inhabited by an evil spirit. A wonderful example of freedom from a debilitating condition yet the response of those to whom she belonged was anger. They had lost an easy and lucrative source of income – and they were furious.

They dragged Paul and Silas before the Magistrates with their complaint. They decide not to make their complaint based on the economic loss they believe they have suffered but have two complaints

1. Paul and Silas were causing a public disturbance. They emphasise the fact that they are Jews to take advantage of anti-Jewish feeling that was not uncommon at the time

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

2. Paul and Silas were advocating non Roman customs. They saw proclamation of the Gospel as anti-Roman. Roman citizens were not supposed to practice foreign cults

The magistrates simply assumed the guilt of the missionaries they didn't enquire as to their citizenship but assuming they were Jews took advantage of the anti-Jewish feeling of the crowd to administer summary justice. They probably only intended to keep them over night and then send them packing. They had Paul and Silas severely beaten and told the jailer to guard them carefully so he put them in stocks.

Paul and Silas got no sleep that night. They were in pain and confined in an uncomfortable position. I have been wondering what my response would be in this situation. I suspect I would be feeling very sorry for myself and not a little angry and resentful. However Paul and Silas, in the midst of their suffering showed their trust in God and their joy in discipleship by praying and singing their praises to him. This is a striking example of the Christian ideal of "joy amid suffering" mentioned by Paul, Peter and James in their letters

God's response is immediate and unmistakable. There is an earthquake that shakes the building where they are imprisoned. The impact of the tremors flings the doors open and breaks the shackles from the walls where the missionaries were chained. Paul's response is astonishing. He made no attempt to escape. This part of Acts shows us time and again how Paul was working in partnership with God. He came to Philippi in response to a vision that he believed meant God wanted him to come and preach the gospel there and at every turn we see him showing that he was looking to God for guidance for the next step. It would have been natural and human to simply run but Paul seems to sense that this is not what God wants to do here. He has a different purpose. So Paul simply waits and when the distressed Jailer, thinking he will be severely punished for the prisoners' escape attempts suicide Paul calls out to reassure him.

The jailer rushes in with lights and bringing Paul and Silas out of their cell falls trembling before them asking, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" It may have been the earthquake that convinced him of the power of the God that these people served, but I think that Paul and Silas's behaviour had much to do with that as well. He could see that these men were different. God was working to release them but he wanted to release the jailer from a different sort of captivity and so the Jailer seems to have come face to face with his own sin and asked for help

Their message is simple but it is the heart of the Gospel message, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." It shows the need

Readings

Freedom For everyone

Benefice HC at Foxton

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20 - end

both for trust and commitment to Jesus. Jesus is saviour to those to whom he is Lord. – if we acknowledge and trust him he brings salvation.

For Paul and Silas the bringing of this man to faith took priority over everything else so wounded and weary as they were we read, “then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house” but poignantly we read that the Jailer saw to the bandaging and washing of their wounds before he was baptised.

There are many things in life that can hold us captive. We see here a girl held captive by her owners and also filled with an evil spirit, her owners held captive by their desire for easy money, Paul and Silas held captive by unjust magistrates and fetters, a jailer held captive by his fear of failure and reprisal. Yet into each of these situations we see God working. Jesus, in his manifesto at the start of his ministry read the passage from Isaiah 61 where it says, “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the poor and release for prisoners,” his mission is to release us from the things that hold us and call us into the freedom of a relationship with him.

All of us are held captive by one thing or another. Sometimes the things that hold us are obvious such as: illness, poverty, injustice, violence, fear, Sometimes they are much less obvious a past that has taught them that they are worthless and have no value, guilt and regret for decisions they have taken, anger, grief, unjust systems that seem to prevent people escaping from their circumstances’ fear of failure, addiction. Sometimes it makes me feel impotent, unable to help. The scale of the human problem is beyond me to manage or untangle. Yet the truth is that it offers me an astonishing opportunity because I have the power to change things for them.

Not in myself. Don’t worry. I am not a megalomaniac. I can do nothing by myself but I have the power to introduce them to someone who can make a difference, who can break the shackles that hold them and bring healing and forgiveness into their lives. Like Paul and Silas I am able to say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” Again and again I have seen Jesus bringing hope and freedom into people’s lives. Sometimes it is a slow journey but it is such a joy to see Jesus bringing freedom.

This is the ministry we have here in our benefice and the ministry to which Mel is called in Bury and we are called together in unity to serve God the best we can