

LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
Sermon: Sunday 8th May 2016 – Rev'd David Coaker

Readings: Acts 16.16-34; Psalm 67

This story begins with a woman, who has an unclean spirit, following Paul and Silas around.

She was most probably enslaved both to her affliction and to the people who enslaved and controlled her. Paul gives her a new way of being; he released her to begin anew, but her captors, who probably made a lot of money from her sought reparation for their loss of business. The two town magistrates place Paul and Silas in prison.

There, they keep their spirits up by singing hymns. They could escape, but choose not to. The prison doors are flung open; the prison warder, fears what will happen to him and is about to end his life, when Paul shouts out from the darkness that they are still in the prison. By remaining, rather than running, the warder sees in these people God's blessing, and invites them to his home. The events lead to faith.

In last week's reading from Acts we had Paul responding to a vision and meeting Lydia by the side of a river and forming the church in Philippi. Lydia was a Gentile, but a convert to Judaism. Her home town of Thyatira (modern day Akhisar in Turkey), was renowned for its prized cloth of distinctive purple colour. In the ancient world the colour purple was a sign of high rank – probably because of the high cost involved in obtaining the dye – so there would have been a buoyant market among the ex-military population of Philippi. So it seems that Lydia was a business-woman, probably the Macedonian agent of a manufacturer back in Thyatira.

So last week Paul has a vision and meets a wealthy woman who helps him to spread the gospel. This week is different....

This time as Paul daily heads to the river, to the place of prayer where he met Lydia in last week's reading, another woman encounters him on the way. She is unlike the genteel and respectable Lydia, she is unnamed, a slave, a fortune-teller, and starts screaming at him any time she sees Paul.

This week it is the slave-girl who is having visions. She declares Paul and his followers "slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

Now you would have thought that Paul would have been happy with the free publicity. Clearly the girl had a talent for this sort of thing as she generated a great deal of money for her owners. Paul could have encouraged her, used her celebrity to increase his.

Clearly you don't make a great deal of money as a fortune teller if you're no good at it. So the people would have known who she was and respected what she said.

But Paul rejected this path. It's written as if he just got really brassed off with this happening every morning and healed her. This is really a mixed up situation. Healing someone because you're annoyed by them? Healing them of a gift that provides an income? She was a slave but talented slaves were looked after, you kept them well looked after to ensure the money kept coming.

The image we have of healing miracles is of an act of compassion to remove hardship. We're used to the image of Jesus kneeling beside someone, asking what they want, and then healing them of an affliction that blighted their life.

Here we have Paul irritated by a girl who is declaring him a messenger of God, which is who he said he was. He heals her and turns her from the golden goose to an everyday hen. She was still a slave but rather than a life of relative luxury and putting on a show in exchange, she now had no special gift so would at best have a menial life serving a family.

So we have a healing that silences a positive message and leaves the person healed worse off.

Maybe Paul was just that annoyed. Maybe just he lost his temper and healed someone. Just doesn't sound right. Before the rise of science and medicine miracle-workers were the doctors and however it worked people were healed. Just like making money as a fortune-teller you don't get accepted as a miracle-worker unless someone has actually seen you perform a miracle. So even if Paul did it for all the wrong reasons, maybe he could still heal her despite his intentions.

But what other reason could Paul have? In our reading last week he seeks out the place of prayer to talk to those that gathered there about the life and message of Jesus. Maybe Paul healed the girl because he thought there was a right way and a wrong way to share the gospel?

Perhaps he was committed to coming alongside those that were already seeking rather than shouting the odds in the market-place?

Possibly Paul believed the best method was to strengthen and deepen the faith of a few, who could then share the gospel themselves, rather than superficially effect many?

We'll never know and Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn't offer us in depth analysis of Paul's reasoning here as the healing is just the setup for what happens next.

The girl Paul healed was a slave, a possession, and because of her gift a very valuable possession that was now worthless. Her owners do not celebrate that she is healed either and drag Paul and Silas before the authorities.

The owners could have just made a financial complaint against Paul and Silas. They had in fact damaged their goods. But instead they go for the worst crime they can accuse them of: "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Disturbing the peace and blasphemy against Rome.

The main priority of groups of people who have the role of authorities is maintaining the status quo. Disturbances cause problems, complaints, and sometimes that can lead to the authorities being replaced. So people in authority like a quiet life where they can reap the benefits of their position but not have to do too much.

So the owners are already on a winner with this argument. They seal it with their second charge. Philippi was a Roman colony, a city dominated by retired Roman legionnaires – and just like any ex-pat community fiercely loyal to the society they are separated from.

Romans believed in many gods, and also that their ruler, Caesar, was one as well. Jews believed in just one God, but were tolerated by the Romans and exempted from worshipping Caesar. So the initial part of the charge is just that Paul and Silas are Jewish, they were different from everyone else, outsiders, and all the prejudice that such exclusive communities hold others in. The weight of the charge comes in Paul and Silas "advocating customs that are not lawful".

Perhaps this supports the idea that Paul was trying to keep his missionary activities outside of the city by the river rather than in the central market-place? Maybe the message he was sharing was one to be whispered and talked about rather than shouted and declared?

So what was the message that could so anger this Roman populace?

Jews with their one God belief were tolerated, allowed to go about their devotions as long as they didn't intrude on Roman forms of worship. So the slave-girls cry of "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation" would have raised some hackles.

But Paul and Silas were Jewish but also Christians. In the early days Christianity was a tradition within Judaism until the Jewish revolt led to Jerusalem being destroyed in 70AD and following that Christianity and Judaism split from each other.

So what was the particular Christian message they declared?

It was the affirmation that Jesus was Lord, Son of God, Prince of Peace, Immanuel, God with us. These affirmations alone would have probably been accepted apart from the fact that these were also titles that Roman worship ascribed to Caesar. Paul and Silas declaring the Jesus was Lord was also saying that Caesar was not.

So Paul and Silas had stolen from the owners of the talented slave-girl, and knowing that they would never receive compensation or have her gift returned, they lay charges of treason against them.

Hearing the charges against them incites the crowd so the magistrates legitimate the beating that has already started and then has them thrown into prison. So without being found guilty of a crime they are beaten and put in prison.

The magistrates are clearly worried and give the jailor clear instructions, which he follows by securing them tightly in the centre of the prison – which has to be the hardest place to escape from.

Paul and Silas respond to this injustice by praying and praising God, which captivates their fellow prisoners. The story then becomes even more dramatic with an earthquake that shakes the doors open and unfastens the prisoner's shackles.

We could hypothesise about whether there actually was an earthquake or was it a metaphor for God's anger at injustice, but it makes for a good story and is pivotal for what we hear next.

Now the roles are reversed. The prisoners are free and now the jailor is condemned. Fearing that he has failed in his duty the jailor prepares to take his own life rather than face punishment, but before he can thrust his sword he hears: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

The drama of an earthquake is heightened with prisoners remaining in their cells even though escape could easily be accomplished. The prisoners have heard about the injustice Paul and Silas received, heard how they responded praying and praising God, felt the earthquake and seen the bonds released and the doors opened, but remain where they are. Knowing that they are justly imprisoned and wanting to experience what will happen next.

The jailer takes only Paul and Silas outside and asks how he can be saved. Paul and Silas repeat the message that got them thrown into prison in the first place and the jailor responds, cleans their wounds, feeds them, and his whole family is baptized.

The jailor now too declares that Jesus is Lord but not Caesar. Through this injustice and dramatic course of events another household become believers. But the jailor is still a jailor. All the other prisoners are now safely secured.

The verses that follow have the magistrates apologising and Paul and Silas leaving Philippi and making their way to Thessalonica.

It is in this, and last, week's readings that the foundation of the church in Philippi is built. It is built through conversation by a river and conflict in the town square.

The church was built by coming alongside people, facing the challenges they came up against, and through it all praying and praising God.

That remains the calling of the Church.

It is in our time together, in worship, in conversation, in church and elders' meetings, in study groups, and all our other activities that we find ways of building up our faith.

Giving each of us the encouragement to come alongside others and share our story and listen to theirs.

It is in facing the questions that are before us, prayerfully, openly and in the light of God's Kingdom, that we seek to discern God's will for our life together. It is together that we are Church, and together that we declare the good news of God in Christ.

May God be gracious to us and bless us.

May God's presence shine upon us.

May God's way be known upon the earth.

Praise God! **Amen**