

## **Easter 7 (Sunday after Ascension Day)**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 29 May 2022

*Readings: Acts 16 vv 16-34 and John 17 vv 20-end*

Last week's reading from the Acts of the Apostles was positive and upbeat. Paul and his companions had concluded that it was not God's plan for them to head into Bythinia. Instead, they crossed to Greece, and went to Philippi. There, they met a successful businesswoman, Lydia, whom Paul baptised, together with members of her household. This was good news. The Christian faith was beginning to take root in western Europe.

Today, we see the darker side of life. We meet a woman who was being exploited - twice. First, she was a slave – not unusual in that period of human history, but a slave nevertheless; and second, she was used to make money by manipulating what was either a genuine spiritual gift of her own or the gullibility and spiritual hunger of anyone her owners could attract. She had no freedom or self-determination. She was being used as a stooge, as a circus side-show act.

She annoyed Paul, who challenged her and exorcised the evil spirit – thus depriving her owners of a lucrative income stream. As has been the case over the centuries, the disgruntled owners resorted to the courts. Presumably because Paul and Silas were not locals, the magistrates sided with public opinion. After a public flogging, Paul and Silas were put into the local prison. And there they might have stayed, had not the prison been shaken by an earthquake, through which the doors of the cells were opened and the prisoners' chains fell off.

The man in charge of the prison naturally assumed that the prisoners had escaped. He was terrified at the consequences that would be fall him, and contemplated suicide. But Paul and Silas had no quarrel with the jailer. Their anger was directed at the magistrates, for imprisoning Paul, even though he was a Roman citizen, and would have expected better treatment. The jailer was so impressed that Paul and Silas had been concerned about him, and the implications for the jailer were they to have escaped, that he asked them to teach him the Christian faith. Paul and Silas did that, with the result that the jailer and his family asked for baptism – just as Lydia and her household had done.

The storm clouds lifted, and the sunshine of hope was once again shining brightly.

I spent a day in Guernsey Prison last week.

I hasten to add that I went in voluntarily, and without bothering the magistrates, and left at the end of the day without any difficulties. I was attending a day conference entitled 'Hidden Sentence', that was looking at the effect of imprisonment on prisoners' families, and especially their children.

Over the years, I have had occasion to visit people in prison. Some of the large UK prisons which I visited, like the prison in Liverpool in the 1980s, were deeply unpleasant and depressing places.

There are all too many stories about prison regimes around the world which are brutal and dehumanising.

There are places where prison is abused, such as Iran, where Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly plotting to overthrow the Iranian government. It seems all too obvious that she was detained simply to put pressure on the British government.

The BBC reports that human rights groups believe China has detained more than one million Uyghurs against their will over the past few years in a large network of what the state calls 're-education camps', and sentenced hundreds of thousands to prison terms.

When people break the law, sentencing them to time in prison may be unavoidable and necessary, sometimes for their rehabilitation and sometimes for the protection of the wider community. But one of the marks of a civilised society is recognition that necessary imprisonment and humane treatment are not mutually exclusive. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime publishes a 14 page document, outlining the 'standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners.'

I have not been able to discover how many nations seek to adhere to these rules. But I think that Guernsey is one of them.

It would be foolish to suggest that those required to reside there enjoy their time in Guernsey Prison, but I have been encouraged, in my encounters with the prison, to find a humane regime.

Recently, I took a service for the burial of the ashes of a woman who had been a significant figure in the life of her grandson. Having been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, he had not been able to attend her funeral, which was not held in Guernsey. However the prison authorities took great pains to enable the grandson to attend the burial of her ashes, albeit with proper security measures in place, with one member of staff coming in to work on a rest day purely to make this possible.

The 'Hidden Sentence' conference raised interesting and important issues about the importance of keeping imprisoned parents in touch with their children – and how doing this significantly reduces the risk of reoffending. This is an example of a humane regime benefitting society.

Paul and Silas were, unjustly, placed in the pitch black of a prison in Philippi, possibly in a dungeon. They were singing hymns to God. We are not told the reaction to this of the other prisoners. The prison in Philippi probably fell far short of the expectations of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. However, that was also a place where amazing things happened. Prisoners did not rush to freedom when the opportunity presented itself. The jailer and the prisoners became friends, and the jailer came to faith. Although Paul had difficulties with many of the places where he introduced people to the Christian faith, Paul regarded the Christian community in Philippi with great affection. He writes to the Philippians, 'I thank my God every time I remember you.'

Hearts were transformed, even in a prison dungeon. Such is the power of Jesus Christ that the oppressors are liberated right along with the oppressed.

This is the last Sunday of Easter. For forty days we have proclaimed the Resurrection, but each of us must consider whether we are actually living as though it were true. Jesus asks us, 'Do you want to be free?' Proclaiming truth to power and singing to God from prison are terrible risks, but the message of Easter is that our liberation is made real. Will we resist? Or, whatever the consequences, will we embrace the possibilities of really allowing God to work in his world? For this, he asks and invites and needs us to be active collaborators.