

## **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 2 June 2019

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

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is, above all other things, a message of liberation.

As they minister in Philippi, Paul and Silas are joined by a companion. She is an enslaved woman, and she is said to have a spirit of divination. We don't really know what that means or how we would describe it today, but the author makes clear what the practical result was: '[She] brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.'

This woman 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.

But she could sense the true spiritual power of Paul and Silas, and she identified it. "She would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days," we read, and then Luke tells us that Paul was 'very much annoyed.' Why was he annoyed? Well, anyone following you around shouting out the same sentence for days at a time might get a bit annoying after a while. It's also possible that Paul was annoyed that his preaching was being short-circuited.

But it's possible there's another explanation for his annoyance. This woman was an ever-present reminder of the very injustice she was undergoing. Slaves were not supposed call attention to themselves. Which is why modern slavery can be hidden in plain sight, certainly in the UK if not here in Guernsey - for example, in the car washes that have sprung up all over the UK, in the sex industry and in some manifestations of domestic service. And why initiatives to challenge it are so important: the churches are increasingly engaged in this important work of challenging vested economic interests and seeking better conditions for the exploited and, in some cases, their freedom from slavery.

It is too easy not to hear the cries of the oppressed, or to kid ourselves that everything is OK. But that will not do, even if taking action is uncomfortable and demanding.

Eventually Paul lets his discomfort drive him to do the work that he is being called to do. He, through the power of Jesus, liberates this woman from her exploitation. "Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour." And then they all carried on, feeling very much better for having helped this woman.

Except that's not what happened. "When her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities ... The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks."

Paul and Silas have succeeded in unleashing the liberating power of the gospel, but in doing so, they have sacrificed their own freedom for the freedom of the slave girl. There is a cost in liberating the oppressed. Paul and Silas were imprisoned.

The enslaved woman was freed. We are about to see the liberation of Paul and Silas and their compatriots from their unjust imprisonment. But what makes this story remarkable is that there is much more liberation happening here than just the obvious. One commentator wrote, 'What makes this story about the transformative power of Jesus Christ is that the oppressors are liberated right along with the oppressed. The enslaved woman cracks open the fault line of liberation, and Paul and Silas help the seismic shift along until God's earthquake comes and the jailer himself, the ultimate oppressor, says yes to the liberation of Jesus.'

When people are willing to work selflessly for the liberation of others, to walk freely the way of the Cross for the sake of those denied their dignity as children of God, justice rolls down like waters. In the words of Isaiah, 'Every valley is exalted and every hill made low.' This is the earth-shattering power of the marriage of justice and mercy that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the foundation of the Kingdom of God.

If we are really willing to let the Kingdom of God break into the world, the consequences are huge. Which is part of the reason why vested powers are, as they always have been, so nervous about losing control and allowing God to work in his world. Think about Thomas Becket in Canterbury in the twelfth century and Oscar Romero in El Salvador in the twentieth century if you are not convinced about the reality of opposition from vested powers.

This is the last Sunday of Easter. For forty days we have proclaimed the Resurrection, but each of us must ask in the privacy of our own hearts 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 earthquake of God is our liberation 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.